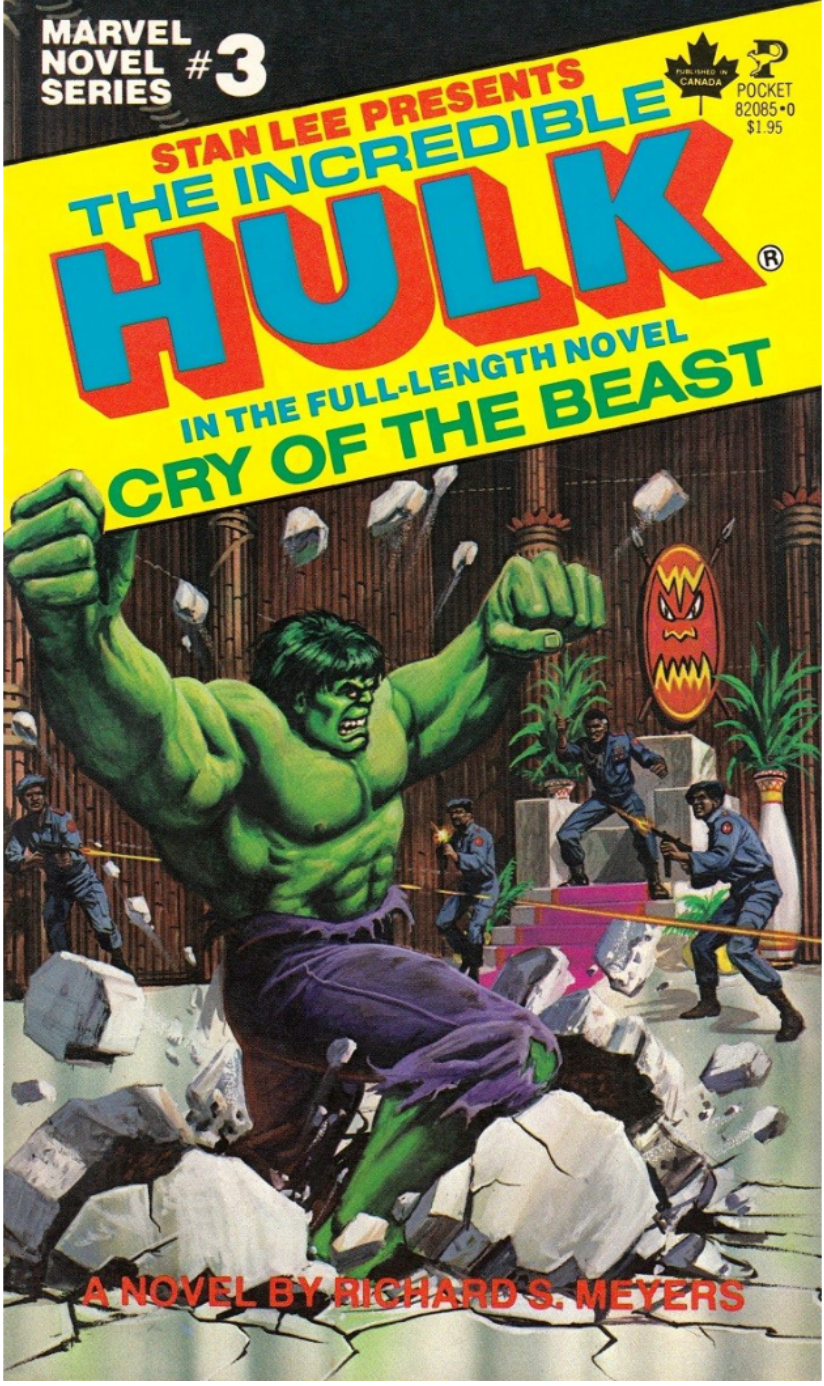
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IN THE FULL-LENGTH NOVEL
CRY OF THE BEAST
A NOVEL BY RICHARD S. MEYERS

THE INCREDIBLE HULK

CRY OF THE BEAST

FROM A SMALL AFRICAN NATION—The world's greatest radiation specialist, Dr. Maxwell Wittenborn, defects! But the murderous madman who controls the country wants him back—at any cost!

TO NEW YORK CITY—Professor Bruce Banner comes to the thriving metropolis seeking a cure for the radiation poisoning that seizes his body and uncontrollably transforms him into a half-human giant.

PANDEMONIUM REIGNS—When Dr. Wittenborn is brutally beaten and kidnapped before Banner's very eyes, there is no time to lose! The entire world may be at stake! Not to mention Banner's last hope of escaping his horrifying fate—one that could turn him, at any moment, into the towering monster known as THE HULK!

WATCH FOR THE HULK AND THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN IN "STALKER IN THE STARS" AND "MAYHEM IN MANHATTEN"

THEN HIS BODY EXPLODED . . .

The buttons on his shirt blew off as if shot from a gun. The shirt itself shattered into streamers of cloth, small bits leaping up into the air. His shoes tore off his feet as if dynamited and his doubleknit slacks rended like a peel ripped from a banana, its waistband just managing to stay intact.

Dark silver-green eyes stared up from a coarse face deeply etched with lines of rage. The hair was a matted mop that looked like it was ripped out against its will from the inside of the huge skull. The arms, the legs, the torso, all of this new creature was almost five times the size of the young man who had rushed to a victim's aid. And all the huge muscles, each strand of hair, and every inch of skin was a dark and deep *green.*

THEY WERE EVIL.
THEY HAD HURT HIM.
THEY WOULD HAVE TO PAY!

CRY OF THE BEAST

BY

RICHARD S. MEYERS

A KANGAROO BOOK
PUBLISHED BY POCKET BOOKS NEW YORK

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To all those
who are trying to do something glorious
with the comic book form.

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Vera Meyers for the third.

And all those who listened to my gamma-related tirades.

One

At first he thought they were trying to kill the man. It was an assumption almost anyone would make given the hot New York night, the dark alley on Forty-fifth Street near First Avenue, the well dressed elderly black gentleman, and the two figures who were systematically pummeling him in the dank confines between the brick buildings.

Even Bruce Banner, the reluctant witness, did not recognize it for what it was. He had been wandering the streets looking for an inexpensive, but relatively safe, place to sleep, when the two men in suits pulled the nattily dressed black off the sidewalk, burying their fists into his face and body. The second possibility that crossed Banner's mind was that it was an all-too-common mugging, but even as he moved forward to help, he noticed that the attackers seemed uninterested in the contents of their victim's pockets.

It was either a thrill-beating or something far more insidious. Banner's logistics were trundled off to the back of his mind as he ran across the street and into the mouth of the alley. His primary concern then was moving his duffel bag off his shoulder for possible offensive use and making as much noise as possible.

"Police!" he shouted. "Somebody call the police!"

At the sound of his voice, the duo's arms stopped flailing and their heads snapped up. The look on their faces stopped Bruce dead. Instead of the intense bloodlust or slack drug-induced frenzy he expected,

Banner saw nothing but cold, bright eyes and professional calmness. These men were not out for blood or money. What they were doing served a more specific purpose.

Bruce quickly looked down at the black's form. The learned-looking man had his nose crushed and blood was slowly coursing down his forehead and from his mouth across his chin, making a small puddle on the garbage-strewn ground of the alley. His dull eyes caught Banner's and as one of his hands tried to reach the thick pair of broken glasses three feet in front of him, the other raised, palm up, in desperate supplication.

"Please . . ." was all the man said.

Then the alley was filled with a brilliant white light. The seedy tableau of an old man being pounded by cruel pros became a silhouette show. As the three shadows melded into one, Banner heard a stomach-shaking roar. Shielding his eyes, he realized the attackers were lifting the black man into a huge car which filled the entire width of the alley—an auto which even now was screaming its power to the night.

As the men's silhouettes disappeared, the six globes of light intensified until Bruce was completely blinded. The quiet night had turned into a sun-bright hell of violence and danger. The machine before him roared again, a door somewhere was slammed, and the headlights began to bear down on him with an awful speed.

Confused, shocked, and unbelievably frightened, Banner turned and ran. He saw his shadow stretch out of the alley and spill into the street, but even before he had taken two stumbling steps, the shadow had shrank back between the blank walls until it was nonexistent. He heard the scream of the huge limo meld with his own as he spun back to face his death.

It all happened so quickly. He had turned and seen a devilishly grinning sheet of metal fill his vision—as if the car were ten feet high. Then he felt the slap of a giant's hand across his legs and the cushioned blow of a pillow as he was lifted up over the car. He flew in what seemed slow motion to him, and one part of his brain realized that he still clutched his large duffel bag before him. It had served as the car's punching bag and had probably saved his life.

Banner crashed to the ground, slid across the muddy dirt, and slammed into a line of garbage cans. Pain punched into his every limb as his bag flew away. Dazed and breathless, he opened his eyes and saw his own clothes floating down. The duffel had ripped open and was covering the area with a rain of shirts, pants, socks, and shoes. Then the pain and the environment dimmed. His vision clouded and all he could hear was the pounding of his own blood through his veins

and the frenzied beating of his heart.

He couldn't think; he couldn't feel; all he knew was the rage. They had beaten and kidnapped an old man; they had tried to kill him. They were evil. They would have to be stopped. They would have to pay.

He only had time to whisper "No" once through clenched teeth before it happened. One minute he was a very small man in a dark and lonely alley, his own clothes strewn about his prone figure. Garbage thrown about in the wake of the speeding car settled around him. One pullover, its arms fluttering out, fell across his face.

Then his body exploded.

The buttons on his shirt blew off as if shot from a gun. The shirt itself shattered into streamers of cloth, small bits leaping up into the air. His shoes tore off his feet as if dynamited and his doubleknit slacks rended like a peel ripped from a banana. The pullover across Banner's face flew up like it was scared by what had just occurred. And the face beneath it was not that of any man on Earth.

Gone were the boyish good looks, the sensitive brown eyes, the slim build, and the sandy brown hair. Dark silver-green eyes stared up from a coarse face deeply etched with lines of rage. The hair was a matted mop that looked like it had been ripped out of the huge skull against its will. The arms, the legs, the torso—all of this new creature was almost five times the size of the young man who had just rushed to a victim's aid. And all the huge muscles, each strand of hair, and every inch of skin was a dark, deep shade of *green* . . .

He awoke in anger, as always. Someone had tried to hurt him and he wanted to hurt them back. He growled bitterly and rose amidst the junk and mud, to his full eight feet. He saw the auto tear around the corner and out into the street, and he recognized it as the source of his pain. His first inclination was to run after it, but somehow he knew that with his size and bulk he would never catch up.

But they had hurt him and they would have to answer for it. This Incredible Hulk didn't actually think about what to do; he just did it. Between him and the speeding car was an office building. And if he couldn't go around it or under it or over it, he would have to go through it.

The legs tensed into two iron-hard bands. The fists became clenched boulders that rose to the level of his chest. The white teeth were bared in a ferocious grin. Then he was up in the air. A second-story window reflected his rising visage for a split second before he crashed through it. The razor-sharp shards of glass had as little effect on him as spun sugar, and he thundered across the room.

The upraised fist connected with the opposite wall a second later. It did not fare much better than the window. Hunks of mortar bounced off him like pieces of cork. A solid oak desk and two plush chairs got in the way next, but not for long. They hit opposite sides of the room at near sonic speed with two swipes of his massive arms. The entire floor shook as he hit the next concrete barrier. It fell in, and the creature plowed into a room filled with tape recorders, video sceens, and copying machines—a mass-media paradise.

But what concerned the creature most was the car, which he now saw coming down the street outside the room's one small window. Without stopping he went for the opening, pounding one standing Xerox machine out of the way. It began spewing duplicates of his fistprint when it crashed into a table, and the Hulk blasted through the final obstacle. In a shower of sparks, the huge green man sailed out over the road, spreading water, debris, paper, glass, and recording tape in his wake.

The ground literally shook as the eight-hundred-pound creature landed five feet in front of the limousine. Road crews clearing away the mess the next day would find enormous indentations in the asphalt which took on the astonishing configuration of two bare feet. The driver of the limo saw the monster that made the depressions for a split second before the metal hit the muscle. To him it was a dark statue, its skin glistening green in the muggy night, its hand open and outstretched. Then the car stopped.

The creature's arm gave slightly, but the car's front end crumbled and the rear tires squealed as the entire back end rose up off the asphalt. A horrible screeching sound filled the deserted street, followed by two sickening thuds as the driver and his companion hit the front windshield. The auto bounced to the right slightly, its engine spewing liquid and smoke.

The creature stared in wonder at what he had done. In something that approached shame and embarrassment, he looked quickly about to see if anyone was watching. But it was three A.M. in New York, and the street was deserted. The Hulk turned back to his handiwork and examined it for a moment until the rear door slowly opened. With a child's curiosity, he moved forward to investigate. What he found managed to surprise even his muddled mind.

Out from the opening rose the largest black man Bruce Banner had ever seen. His head looked like a dark basketball and was set on a beam of a neck. His facial features seemed tiny in comparison and were almost hidden by peaks of lard. A deep crimson uniform made his shoulders and torso resemble the trunk of a redwood tree while his mitt-like hands were encased in black leather. But the most surprising

thing about him was that he was convulsed with laughter.

The green man moved forward threateningly and growled, which only incited the black man into renewed bouts of mirth. He laughed to the skies, caught a look at the green grimacing face, then doubled over again, guffawing. The creature watched in consternation until he couldn't help wondering what was the matter. He looked down at himself but couldn't find anything amiss. His confusion caused the black fellow to wheeze hysterically and pound the top of his car with one large fist.

By the time the man's laughter had run dry, the green creature found himself smiling tentatively. "Oh, my," the black man said in a rumbling bass tone. "That was magnificent." He took a look into the front seat, where the two muggers lay unconscious, and giggled. "Magnificent," he repeated, returning his gaze to the big green roadblock. "I need men like you, my brother," he intoned. "Do you have a name?" The tiny eyes in the big black face searched the other's for comprehension. "What can I call you?"

The sounds confused the creature. His hands moved slowly about, silently transmitting his inability to understand, and his throat painfully moved to frame the word he knew best . . . the word that had been screamed at him throughout his tortured life . . . the word he could not even translate but that haunted him everywhere he found himself. His mouth opened and with rasping difficulty he said, "Hulk."

The black man nodded. "I will call you the Hulk, my friend," he said. "And you can call me the General. The General. You may call me anytime, anywhere. Here." The uniformed man took a small card from his jacket pocket and placed it in the Hulk's big hand. "You can think about it, or will you join me now?"

The Hulk stared at him, and the General mistook his silence for reticence. "Very well," he said. "When you are ready, call."

With that, the black giant pulled open the warped front door and easily pushed the driver out of the way. Ignoring the crumpled condition of the car and the cracked windshield, he managed to start the engine and drive off.

The Hulk walked slowly across the basement floor. He was angry and confused. He was angry because he had had to run twelve blocks before he found a place where he felt safe. He was confused by the friendly words of the big black man. The face had been smiling and the manner was concerned, but something had told him that the fellow wasn't to be trusted.

Something was wrong—something more than the car hurting him . . . something, something . . . he couldn't remember. For a moment he

saw a second black face, torn and bloody, desperate and pleading, but it was replaced by that of the laughing fat man, the one who had found his friends' injuries so vastly amusing.

The Hulk couldn't make sense out of it. He was tired. He wanted to sleep. Sleep meant he wouldn't have to live in a nightmare world where people screamed at him, ran from him, or tried to hurt him. The Hulk moved into a corner and hunched down, blinking. They had tried to hurt him and he hurt them back while the black man laughed. The thought scared the Hulk. He would go to sleep so he wouldn't have to think. He would be safe, asleep, because the only thing he knew for sure was that waking meant rage and sleep meant peace.

Two

John Newel had known little peace in his life. First, when he had opened his own British-based business, he had been too ambitious. Then, when the trial and press had struck him down, he had been too proud. Next the government had taken the rest of his fortune in back taxes, and he had been bitter. When he had moved to America, he had been too poor. Now, in his sixty-eighth year, all he was was too old.

Old John Newell had treated life like garbage, and it had returned the favor. He had no loves, few friends who knew where he was, many acquaintances who appeared when he had enough change for a bottle, and a dank, dark, unheated cellar he called home.

What he had plenty of was enemies. The cops who rousted him from his favorite park bench were his enemies. The streetwalkers who cackled insults as he passed were his enemies. The neighborhood parents who avoided him were his enemies. And the children—especially the children—were his enemies.

Not the little ones, no, not the ones who were too small to know or care . . . but the smart, crafty ones—the teens—the ones who passed on the hate of their world directly to him, the ones who threw garbage at him, the ones who slapped at him as they sped by on their bikes, the ones who dropped lit matches on him as he slept. It was all a joke to them, a game of “beat the bum.”

And that is what they finally did last night. Last night had been the worst. A bunch of them had come into the alley, all smiles, like they were going to the ballpark. They’d picked up garbage can tops and broken boards as they came. Then, with great relish, they had begun

to bounce him all over the alley, banging their makeshift paddles on him as if he were an especially loathsome college frat initiate.

He suffered a scalp cut, a chipped tooth, and countless bruises. When he woke up, it was near six o'clock in the morning, if the sun was any judge. Old John shook himself lightly to test the damage. In a second he decided that he had felt worse.

"I'll have to move from this damned city," he told himself. "It's getting too dangerous. The grandparents beat the parents, the parents beat the grandchildren, the grandchildren beat the children, the children beat the kids, and the kids beat me. Hee, hee."

Old John liked the way that sounded. He liked the way it sounded so much that he repeated it constantly while walking the five blocks down and the three across to his cellar. By the seventh block, he realized he felt dizzy and had been weaving back and forth across the sidewalk. He wasn't even drunk. He needed some wine to stop feeling so bad, so hot, but there was no one on the street to panhandle from. Newell plucked at his tattered overcoat with unsure fingers and kept walking.

"I'll never get to sleep," he said to no one in particular, but with certainty. "I know what this is. This is fever." He nodded with conviction, his sweat dotting the concrete. "I've had this before and I never got to sleep. I just sweated and ached. Awful. Couldn't even get up and find a bottle. Just sweat-ached. Sweat-ached. Headache-sweater. Pattycake-sweeter. Played pattycake in a sweeter sweater with a headache. Hee, hee."

Old John nearly fell down the cellar steps. The door had developed a hole which went unrepaired, so he just squeezed through on his hands and knees. Without bothering to rise, Newell curled up on the hard-packed dirt, moved the foot that was in his face, then closed his eyes.

Then he opened them again. There was a foot in his face. And it wasn't his. Old John shook his head, but the foot was still there. Old John shut his eyes and opened them again, but it was *still* there. Old John figured it was about time to investigate further. He rose to his elbows to see a sleeping young man sitting up against the basement wall.

He looked to be about thirty years old, judging from the tight muscles lining his chest and arms. Although the man was far from musclebound, there was not one extra ounce of fat or flesh on his lithe frame. About six feet tall, Old John figured, and handsome in a mediocre way. There were deep stress lines across his forehead and around his eyes. The brown hair showed a few gray and white strands. But certainly the most unnatural thing about the man was his clothes.

Old John thought he himself looked fairly ragged, but this fellow's wardrobe was made of confetti. His shirt hung in blue streamers from his shoulders. His pants, what was left of them, looked like a grass skirt. And they were awfully big for him, as well.

The fellow's eyes, which had opened while Old John was studying him, were brown and deep. His awakening expression was completely vacuous, as if nothing could possibly surprise him anymore. Old John leveled one uneven finger at the fellow's nose.

"You're a doctor, right?"

A slight show of surprise flew across the man's face. Then the expression was empty again.

"I am no one," said a clear, unaccented voice as bland as his visage.

"You're a doctor, all right," said Old John. "I never miss. Either that or an artist. Hands, m'boy, hands give you away. Never seen hands like those on anyone but a doctor or artist. I swear they must grow on doctors naturally. Maybe it's something they put into the food at med school. I swear these kids can go in with the ugliest little stubs on their palms and come out looking like Michelangelo. I swear."

The young man was looking around.

"You're in New York, son," said Old John. "Doctor capital of the world. Forty-third Street and Ninth Avenue. Lots of doctors around here. Need 'em. Plenty of disease, y'see."

The young man put his doctor's hands across his face and rubbed. Dropping them again to his lap, he looked at the bum squatting at his feet.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"John Newell is my name, son," the bum replied, putting out a shaky hand. "Old Sir John, my friends call me, 'cause I was almost knighted once. Up for the O.B.E. once, y'know, in '54. Then I lost my money, my reputation, and my accent. Hee, hee."

The young man took the bum's hand absently. They shook in mutual exhaustion.

"Now, who are you?" Old John asked, returning his hand to the floor so he wouldn't fall over.

"Call me Bruce," said the other, smiling for the first time and rising to his knees.

"See there?" said Old John. "You're not nobody."

"And you're burning up with fever," said Bruce.

Old John let Bruce Banner lower him onto the ground, then watched through drooping lids as the young man searched the cellar for something to cover him with.

“Told you you were a doctor,” the bum mumbled before losing consciousness.

When the old man awoke, Bruce was talking to himself. But his utterances were not addled. His monologue was the reaction of a person too long alone. Even as he spoke, he continued to mop the old man’s brow.

“We’re a lot alike, Old John,” he said. “We’re both homeless, both nameless, both running away from something. We’re both running from nothing, really—things we can’t put our fingers on exactly. What was your wealth? Your success? Numbers in a book, that’s all. Something someone else tells you about. A mumbled word that gets you a table in a restaurant or a seat at a sold-out theater.

“But what is it I’m running from? I don’t know. I’ve never met it. But I know what I’m told and what I read in the papers. He’s big and strong and green.”

“Sounds like a cop I knew once,” said Old John.

Banner looked down at his patient without surprise.

“Did you ever have a bully for your best friend?” he asked.

“You mean like Paully Prouse back on St. Anders Street? He was a pal o’ mine back when we were kids. He was the only real bully boy I ever knowed.”

“Sure, Paully Prouse is fine. Now take him and multiply his size and strength by five. Now take him and multiply his meaness by five. Like if you stepped on his foot, he’d put you through a wall. Now what if every time you got mad at someone, he’d show up and avenge you? And what if you were never sure when he’d show up or who he would beat on? Say you’re having a fight with your girl friend. What if he punched her and hurt her?”

“I wouldn’t get mad,” Old John said pleasantly.

“I’ve tried not to!” Bruce burst out. “And it’s impossible! You know how stupid people are? How rude and inconsiderate? I’ve tried to stay calm in this city, but do you know how everything grates at you? It’s like everyone wants to get everyone else angry.”

“Take it easy, take it easy,” said the bum. “We don’t want old Paully Prouse to show up here.”

Banner stopped for a moment, then laughed easily. “Quite true, Old John, quite true. Well said—especially since if old Paully showed up now, he’d be practically unstoppable and green to boot.”

“Green? Why green?” asked Newell.

“Why, indeed, green?” Banner retorted, rising to his feet. “I’ve been trying to figure that out. But there’s nothing I can do to find out for

sure." Banner started pacing. "I can't test him, because he's never around when I'm around. I can't get him to test himself because he doesn't think straight, you know?"

"Wait, wait," said Old John from the floor. "Couldn't you send him a letter or call him up or something?"

Banner laughed again, but with an edge of hysteria to his voice. "Don't think I haven't tried," he said with quiet desperation. "But it's like every time he shows up, I disappear. I'm awake, sort of, but asleep at the same time. I can feel, but not really. It's like being completely covered in a skintight rubber suit that's as strong as steel. I can't see but I'm aware. I can be hit, but I can't be hurt. And this huge, green Paully Prouse is beating up on people. I want to call out, but I can't. I want to stop him, but I can't. I can't."

"What do you do?" asked Newell, understanding nothing, but not wanting to lose his first real company in years.

"Try not to get angry, like you said. Try to make sure he doesn't come around. And try to figure out as much as I can about him. Maybe change him. Maybe stop him forever."

"How much do you know?" the bum whispered conspiratorially.

Banner looked down at the old man at his feet. The ex-Britisher's face was flushed and covered with sweat, showing that he had beaten the fever. He was enjoying himself thoroughly. His eyes were lit with a non-alcohol-inspired passion, and it was clear that there was still some brain left in the gin-soaked skull. It was all a fairy tale to him, Banner realized, a bedtime story to keep the day away, just to pass some time. What harm would it do to lay it all out for him? Banner wondered. He needed to tell someone. Sure, what harm would it do?

"He's somewhere around seven or eight feet tall by eyewitness account," Banner said, hunching down. "Some people have said as much as twelve feet, but I think they were exaggerating—with good reason, though. He's totally green, except for his eyes, which are supposedly silver—bright silver with specks of green. Even his fingernails and hair are green."

The young man rose to his feet again and ambled about the cellar as he continued.

"Near as I can guess, he's that color because of chloroplasts. Chloroplasts are the same things that supply plants with their food and oxygen. Somehow this Hulk is invested with a thick covering of chloroplasts, which add to his strength. They would also explain why he can go without eating or resting for so long. His skin would literally be sustaining him. The only thing I can't explain is where he goes when I show up or where I go when he shows up—into a nether-dimension, maybe."

The words were beginning to make Old John woozier than his sickness. “Where . . . where did he come from . . . whoever . . . whatever he is?” he uttered, trying to send the verbal stream in another direction.

“From an accident,” said Banner, unaware of Old John’s confusion. “A stupid accident. An overdose of what is called gamma radiation.”

“Gamma?”

“It’s the third letter of the Greek alphabet,” explained Bruce amiably. “It’s also the degree of contrast of a photographic image or the third of three or more closely related chemical substances. It is also a high-energy photon. Do you want to know what a photon is?”

“No, thank you,” said Old John carefully. “You really are a doctor.”

Banner laughed without reserve. “Not really. I may have been once, but now it’s just something that doesn’t mean anything anymore. The only thing that means anything to me now is the Hulk.”

“The Hulk?”

“That’s what they call this green guy,” Banner said with bitterness. “The Incredible Hulk. They hunt him, hound him, and try to hurt him. Not once have they tried to communicate meaningfully with him or understand him.”

“Just like me,” said Old John.

Banner smiled. The old man looked far better than he had earlier. He looked halfway decent, quite possibly fifty percent better than he had in a long time. Banner had been able to sterilize his wounds with some wood alcohol he had found in a hole behind the wall, and he had bound the old man’s bruises with what was left of his shirt.

“Yes, just like you,” he responded.

“Well, I’ll tell you, Doctor Bruce, if you take care of this Hulk as good as you took care of me, he’s got a real friend.”

Banner knew it was time to leave. The sun was streaming in through the holes in the walls and windows and the sounds of sirens and traffic jams were already loud in the cellar. The banks were sure to be open.

“Oh, no,” said Bruce Banner, moving toward the decrepit doorway. “He has no friend in me. He knows I’m his worst enemy. You see, I’ve been trying to destroy him for years.” Banner stood halfway out the broken basement door. “Take care of yourself, Sir John,” he said.

“Mr. Jacoby!” cried the dark-haired teller. “Mr. Jacoby, could you come here a moment, please?”

Sal Jacoby dropped his gold pen with consternation. How could anyone expect him to get any paper work done when these summer

replacements, these high school temporaries, kept calling him to help them with the simplest transactions? Ever since the bank had decided to go modern, he thought, the working conditions had deteriorated alarmingly.

All the wood and paper had been replaced with plastic, including the cash. Nowadays everything was done with cards and the new "money machines." A computer could do your banking, so why did they need these summer kids in here to mess things up?

"Mr. Jacoby!"

"Just a moment," he called back. If they had computers, he thought as he stood up, why couldn't they install an intercom system, too, so the executives wouldn't have to shout at the tellers and the tellers didn't have to shout at the patrons? Every noontime the bank sounded like an army induction center with all the cries of "Next!" and "Step down, please!" Jacoby pushed his chair back with a vengeance and stalked over to teller number six, the special accounts line.

"Yes, Audrey, what is it?" Audrey was a nineteen-year-old with a face like a bull and a manner that could faze Attila the Hun. Customers practically had to apologize for taking up her valuable time.

"This gentleman says he has an account with us," she said more through her nose than her mouth.

"Yes?"

"He says it is one of our twenty-four-hour CentralBank computer accounts."

"So?"

"He says that his coded CentralBank card is being held in a safe-deposit box here."

"And?"

"Well, I can't let him in there," she said with defiance.

"Why ever not?" replied Jacoby in exasperation.

"He's not wearing any shirt or shoes!"

"Perhaps I can explain," said a soft voice beside Jacoby. The bank executive turned to see a fairly handsome and well-developed young man, a bit on the thin side, perhaps, wearing nothing but a ragged pair of pants, and holding those up with one hand.

"I need the card to get the cash to get the shirts and shoes," continued the nearly naked man.

"But the sign clearly says that no one is allowed in the bank without a shirt or shoes," the teller stridently declared, pointing at the sign tacked to the inside of the bank door.

"Audrey," said Mr. Jacoby, "did you check this man's account?"

"Yes, sir," the girl replied with pride.

"Is it in good standing?"

"Well . . . yes."

"Then I think we should let this man buy some new clothes, don't you?" Jacoby was enjoying the teller's discomfort too much to raise much fuss over the eccentric patron.

"But . . ."

"Audrey."

"Yes, sir?"

"Shut up."

Bruce Banner emerged from Barcroft's Clothiers in a loose beige cotton shirt, loose blue flair-bottomed pants with an elastic waistband, and blue deck shoes. Under one arm he had a small shaving kit and in the other hand he held a billfold.

He had already returned the CentralBank card to its safe-deposit box—he had no idea when he might need it again. Ever since his Curse had begun, he had made it his habit to find work all over the country, then place his earnings in banks with high dividend rates and twenty-four-hour computer service. That way, almost anywhere in the country, he would not be totally helpless.

In the shaving kit he had soap, a plastic shaver, and some high-protein health bars. In the billfold was some extra money and a card, one he had found in the pocket of his ruined slacks. It showed only an address, the address of the United Nations Plaza, but it was the address of the man Banner had come to New York to meet—Dr. Maxwell Wittenborn.

Banner knew that address by heart, but how could the Hulk have gotten this card with Wittenborn's address? Could the doctor have, somehow, spotted the creature and diagnosed the situation? Then he may have left his card as a clue to Banner when he again reached sanity. After all, Wittenborn was one of the greatest radiation scientists in the world. Who would better understand gamma-inflicted effects? It was almost too much to be hoped for. If only Banner were able to remember what had happened.

But, as was often the case, the previous day's occurrences were hidden from his memory. He could only recall the humid night and a strange sudden pain; otherwise, he wasn't sure of anything. Banner was sure of something else, however. He was going to find out how he had gotten the U.N. card, and he was going to find out today.

Banner checked the address on the card again, opened his shaving

kit, tore open a peanut-butter bar with his teeth, then started across town.

Three

The United Nations building rose into the afternoon sky looking like a monument to someone's good idea gone wrong. For while the monolith of glass and steel shone, the sky around it was a pollution-tinted gray, allowing in only a smoky kind of sunlight. Tracking down the number on Banner's card took a good twenty minutes of checking side streets, blind alleys, and dead ends, but finally Banner found the corresponding numbers winding down what looked like a driveway to a small wharf by the East River.

The dock looked like a miniature of the bigger shipping yards which littered the New York coastline, but instead of tying up English luxury liners or Swedish barges, the scurrying, well-dressed men were docking small runabouts, tall sailing sloops, and cabin cruisers. It seemed to be a facility for ambassadors who enjoyed sailing.

The wharf workers were all dressed in pressed denim bell-bottoms, tailored French white shirts with three pockets and epaulets, and blue deck shoes. In Banner's own sporty outfit, he looked almost like one of them, so it wasn't surprising when a man with curly hair called out to him in a clipped French accent.

"Hey! Lend a hand, will you?"

Banner turned to see the Frenchman floating toward the dock on a handsome sailboat, motioning with a pile of rope in his hand. Bruce hurried over to the edge of the wharf, put down his kit, and held his

arms out.

The Frenchman threw the rope to Banner, who nimbly caught it and began to pull the boat in. The Frenchman, meanwhile, had run to the rear of the craft, grabbed another rope, and jumped onto the wharf in order to secure the rear end. Together they pulled in the boat and tied it to the upright pilings.

"Very nice," called the Frenchman. "You're new here, are you not?"

"Sort of," answered Bruce. "I just got here." He walked over to where the Frenchman stood.

"You have a fine, steady hand. Most of these fools bounce the hull off the wood a few times before they secure the lines."

"Thanks, but to be perfectly honest, I'm not one of the crew here. This is the address I was given to meet an old associate of mine. What is this place, exactly?"

"This is basically what it looks like—a pleasure-boating wharf. United Nations delegates and their friends can come and go as they please on these waters." The Frenchman waved an arm at the river, which sparkled despite the overcast sky, the layers of leaked gasoline, and the beer cans, wood, tires, and other assorted garbage. "But perhaps I can help you," he said, returning his attention to Banner. "Who are you looking for?"

"Wittenborn. Dr. Maxwell Wittenborn."

The Frenchman looked startled then turned wary and then confusion muscled in.

"You cannot mean you haven't heard? But we were all informed . . . ah . . . you must not be a delegate? Ah, no wonder . . ."

"Heard? Heard what?"

"Maxwell Wittenborn disappeared last night. All the police found were his broken glasses in an alley near here."

A vivid picture suddenly burst into Banner's brain with the fury of his alter-ego. He saw again the face of the black man, torn and pleading.

"That?" he gasped. "That was Wittenborn?"

"What? Are you all right?"

The Frenchman had taken Banner's elbow and was looking into his face. Bruce's despair diminished under the man's concerned gaze, and he pulled himself together.

"Yes . . . I'm fine, just surprised, that's all. I . . . ah . . . suddenly remembered I saw a man, with glasses, around here last night. He looked like Wittenborn, but I couldn't be sure in the dark."

"Of course, of course. This city spends millions to set up

illumination to make the streets safe, then nothing to keep the lights working. Ah, but this all must be a shock to you. I could have sworn you turned sort of green just now."

Both men laughed uncomfortably.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," said a monotonal voice behind them. The two turned to face another two men dressed in look-alike suits of blue doubleknit. Physically, the duo was completely different. One was of medium build and had sandy hair, like a beach bum-gone-establishment, and the other was a big blond kewpie doll, like a Campbell's soup kid-turned-weight-lifter.

"I'm Agent Stevens," said the sandy-haired one. "This is Agent Hill. C.I.A." The two seemed to nod slowly in unison as they showed their government identification. "We have instructions to search your boat."

"My boat?" uttered the Frenchman. "Why?"

"We have reason to believe that a foreign power is about to embark on a rather extensive exercise in espionage," Stevens reported with admirable candor. "We are empowered to extensively examine every entry."

"Is this about the Wittenborn disappearance?" asked Banner.

The agents' eyes narrowed in unison. "Why do you ask?" queried Hill.

"I . . . uh . . . had an appointment with him this morning," Banner said with as much sincerity as he could muster.

"Dr. Wittenborn always gave out cards as affirmations of his appointments," said Stevens. "Did you acquire one?"

Banner's heart leaped. His earlier supposition could have been true, then! He quickly reached for his wallet in his back pocket, and the C.I.A. agents just as quickly reached inside their coats.

"Just a billfold, just a billfold!" cried Banner as the Frenchman hastily reached for the sky.

"Slow . . . go very slowly," said agent Hill.

Banner pulled out his wallet in slow motion and he displayed the card with the address on it. The agents took one look at it, then immediately pulled their guns out all the way and pointed them at Banner's torso.

"Don't move," they both said.

Banner remained frozen in position with his wallet open. The Frenchman fainted.

"I don't believe it," she said with vehemence. "This is not the man my father met with yesterday!"

The young man in the peach-colored three-piece suit giggled.

"What's so funny?" asked the girl.

"You," said the giggling man. "You're always funny when you get angry—the way your nose crinkles up like a little pixie's and the way your lips get all white and thin."

Agents Stevens and Hill looked up at the ceiling.

Banner couldn't believe it, either. He had been trundled off the wharf under the guns of the C.I.A. and into the United Nations building itself. After a silent trip through some subterranean catacombs, he was led into an opulent elevator the size of a Greenwich village apartment and the three of them had sped up to the U.N. penthouse at dizzying speed.

He was then led into a sumptuous suite overlooking the river where two young people—a decidedly foppish man the size of Wilt Chamberlain and a petite young lady who resembled a dark elf—were waiting. The man's demeanor was one of elaborate boredom, but the decidedly attractive girl was in the midst of a temperamental fit. Her attitude was only heightened by Banner's entrance and the C.I.A. agents' theories.

"Tony," she said, "if you can't help, just keep still. Our father's missing and all you can do is sigh loudly and lap up the booze."

"That reminds me," said the man, "I'm thirsty."

"Then make yourself a drink and keep out of the way." The girl returned her attention to the agents as Tony ambled over to the oak bar across the room. "Now go through it again," she instructed.

"Your father disappeared, Miss Wittenborn, yesterday, after a meeting about which his secretary knew nothing. We are under the impression that it was with the representatives of a certain South African nation in which the bulk of your family still resides," said Agent Hill.

"The leader of that certain South African country has never forgiven your father for what he terms 'this traitorous defection.' He has made it public knowledge that he would consider Dr. Wittenborn's return to his country a wise diplomatic move for the United States to make," said Agent Stevens.

"While the U.S. considers that such a move would be like slitting its own throat," said Tony Wittenborn, sipping his Scotch at the bar, "putting one of the greatest radiation specialists in the world today back into the hands of that murderous madman would be ridiculous."

"That is not the government's official position," chastised Stevens patiently.

"Ignore him," said the girl as Tony laughed lightly. "Go on. Where

does this guy fit in?" She stabbed one finger in Banner's direction.

"He arrived on the wharf today with a card remarkably like the one the leader of that certain South African state uses," said Agent Stevens, handing the card in question to the girl. It was a simple gray card with raised gold lettering and six stars in the upper righthand corner. The only words spelled out the wharf's mailing address.

"We are inclined to believe that this man may be a contact with your father's kidnappers," said Agent Hill.

For the first time the girl came around from behind the couch. As she approached, Banner took her in. She was only about five feet two inches tall. Her lightly curled hair was pulled back from her forehead by a rose-colored ribbon. She wore a cotton gauze skirt, which swirled around her calves, and a matching sleeveless top. Her eyes were cat-like, almost like teardrops falling at each other from opposite sides of her face.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"An . . . associate of your father's."

"What do you want?"

"I wanted to see him about a problem of mine."

"Where is he?"

"I have no idea."

The two agents flanked Banner without expression while Tony looked on with amusement from across the room. The girl looked at Banner for a few seconds more, then turned away.

"I still don't believe it," she said. "Why should he play games with us?"

"Why shouldn't he?" Tony put in. "The General's a sadistic, perverted maniac."

Agents Hill and Stevens cringed. "I wish you wouldn't use proper names," said the blond.

"Why not? What's all the cops and robbers? If this white boy's from the General, then I don't have to keep secrets from him, do I? We all know what we're talking about, don't we? Anybody listening in knows what we're talking about, don't they? Then why not call a spade a spade?"

Tony turned and shouted at Banner, "Where did you get that card?"

"I don't know," said Banner helplessly.

"Who gave it to you?"

"I don't know."

"When did you get it?"

"I don't . . . last night sometime."

“How? Through the mail? Did you find it? What?”

“I don’t know,” Banner answered truthfully.

Tony Wittenborn pegged Banner with one bright eye, then returned his attention to his drink. “I’d torture the sucker,” he said. Then he fell over.

The girl looked disgusted, as if she was used to his drunken displays, but the agents’ guns were out and Stevens was already prowling around the room. Hill had his hand on Banner’s upper arm and his gun at his neck.

“Window’s unbroken,” said Stevens as he moved quickly about the suite. “Doors closed. Latches secured.”

“What are you doing?” asked the girl. “What’s the matter?”

“Your brother did not drink enough to lose consciousness, Miss Wittenborn,” said Agent Hill. “The General may be trying to make his threat of taking you back into a reality.”

Stevens stepped below a wall air vent. “Gas,” he said through clenched teeth. “Get out!” Hill immediately motioned the girl ahead of him as he swung Banner around to the door, and Stevens began to pile Tony onto his back.

Just as the girl gripped the knob, the door flew outward. She had time only to shriek once before she was thrown into the arms of a man covered completely in black. He held both her hands with one strong one of his own as he pushed a large pad across the lower half of her face. Hill only had time to pull his weapon away from Banner’s neck before he was blasted back onto the white fur couch by a silenced machine gun. And Banner was too stunned to be frightened—or angry.

He watched in amazement as several more black-garbed men jumped into the suite, riddling the room with bullets as they came. The only sound was of breaking glass and the muffled clicking of the specially built machine guns. Agent Stevens pulled Tony Wittenborn up as a shield, since he was sure the attackers wouldn’t want to hurt their quarry, but the nearly seven feet of slickly dressed unconsciousness was too much for him to hold while trying to aim his gun. The limp body tumbled back to the floor as Stevens’s big pistol went off.

The deafening roar made Banner cringe. It echoed through the room as bullet after bullet poured into the C.I.A. man. Stevens did a macabre death dance, then smashed into the bar, sending a shower of crystal and liquid spinning out to the floor before him.

Two men grabbed Tony from the rug and a rough glove clubbed Banner on the shoulder. “Move,” said an accompanying voice near his ear. “And no sound.” Banner didn’t have to be told twice.

“The pig’s gun will bring everyone else,” Banner heard another voice say as he was hustled down the hall to the elevator over the strewn bodies of other guarding agents.

“We all know that,” said Banner’s new captor. “Keep quiet.”

The now-unconscious girl was held in the arms of a huge man who led the procession, and Banner saw several black-garbed men leaping down an open-air grate up on the wall. Turning his head for a moment, he saw two more men carrying Tony. The group stopped before the elevator.

“Sixteen, eight, three,” said the voice beside Banner. “Stairs. Fifteen, seven, two—airshaft. Seventeen, nine, four—elevator roof. Eighteen, ten, five—outside building. Nineteen, eleven, six—fire escape. Everyone else, let’s go.” The man holding the girl, the two carrying Tony, and the two shepherding Banner moved into the elevator with their captives. Seconds later they were in the basement catacombs, where a gun battle was already in progress.

Since no one dared to shoot at the girl or her brother, Banner felt safe, but it was a strange feeling. The C.I.A. agents blasted away with their big pistols, while the black-suited assault squad quietly bumped the concrete, metal, plastic, and flesh with silent lead. It was almost like a passionate ballet of death in which Banner was the only member of the audience.

They finally moved across the pipe-filled hallway and came out into a huge, window-lined warehouse. This was directly connected to the river by a sheet-metal door which was even now opening. More three-piece-suited adversaries appeared, and the two groups simply shot one another while the captors and captives moved toward the water.

For in the middle of the warehouse floated a biplane on huge water skis, piloted by two more black-suited men. The side door opened and even more black-garbed murderers hopped out, covering the approaching prisoners. The area was filled with light and fire as more and more C.I.A. agents and marauders had at each other. Bullets, oaths, and screams reached a blood-curdling crescendo around them as the girl and Tony were bundled into the aircraft.

A harsh voice grated again in Banner’s ear: “Get in.” But Banner couldn’t hear him anymore. The shock had given way to disbelief and an unknown rage. Suddenly the rational half of his mind shut down, replaced by a screaming anger. A roaring noise from his subconscious tore forth until all he could think was that they were evil . . . they had hurt the pretty girl . . . they had cold-bloodedly murdered . . . they had trapped him . . . they would hurt him, too . . . they had to be stopped . . . they had to be taught a lesson!

Banner felt a tug at the edge of his mind, which opened the

floodgates and turned on the high-energy current. He was hunched over in the plane's doorway, but if anyone had seen his face, they would have stared into eyes of bright silver.

Somewhere, back in that part of his mind that was still Bruce Banner, he knew that all there was left before the Change was that slight sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. Then he would explode into his other incarnation—the Incredible Hulk. And by the time the Hulk was through, Banner wouldn't be surprised if they were all at the bottom of the East River.

He felt himself falling, and a sudden petrifying fear overtook him. He was dying—he knew it. And he couldn't do anything about it. It was all up to the Hulk now, but could even he face the veritable army of gun-wielding maniacs? Could even he fight a hailstorm of bullets?

Banner still didn't hear the voice beside him spit, "Damn it! I said move!" But he did feel the pain as the gun butt ripped into the back of his head. Then a sickening pain of another kind filled his body, and Bruce Banner, with closed eyes, crashed to the floor of the plane.

Four

Banner awoke to whimpering. A broad insistent sobbing seemed to clog his dreamless sleep until his head felt like an echo chamber. The stuffiness almost suffocated him. The first thing he saw was hay.

"Oh, God," said the high, sobbing, voice. "What are we going to do?"

Banner took a moment to orient himself. Before the Curse, his mind had been a wonder of nearly mathematical exactness. Thought had been neatly stacked on thought, theory on theory, until his mind was a model mansion of genius. But the gamma rays had wrecked the foundation, and the house that logic had built had come tumbling down. Now, unless he reacted by instinct, Banner found himself carefully examining every new environment, every new situation, with a care that matched that of a man in a mine field. He had to be extra careful where he stepped in his mental mine field. The damage could be irreversible, and the explosion would always be green.

"Someone must find us!" the voice gasped. "They won't stop looking until they do. Oh, God . . ."

Banner took a deep breath and tried to picture who was making all the noise. The tone and temperament seemed to dictate a feminine source—the classic woman in distress. He sighed again and slowly turned over. Before him lay a tall black man in a soiled three-piece suit. Next to him kneeled a diminutive vixen of a girl who was dabbing at his face with the hem of her long, loose skirt. It was the man who was doing all the complaining.

“So you’re finally awake,” said the man in the same whining tone. The scene came back to Banner then: the dead C.I.A. men, the unbelievable exodus from the U.N., the entrance to the hydroplane, and that one split second before the Change would have come.

“You’re Tony,” he said slowly.

“The boy talks,” the man said in smug disbelief to his sister.

“Oh, Tony,” she said, “at least he’s making more sense than you.” And with that she moved to Banner’s side.

“You’re Wittenborn’s daughter,” Bruce continued, pointing at her as she crouched down. “And we were taken by someone for some reason that I have no . . . ouch!”

She had been lightly pressing the back of his head. “Just lie still,” she instructed. “You got a nasty crack back at the dock, Tony tells me. At least that convinced us you weren’t one of them.”

“It also convinced me that you have one of the hardest heads in the world,” commented Tony snidely. “That blow would have decapitated most of my friends.”

“I have good genes,” said Banner dryly. The girl continued to probe the back of his head. “But who are ‘them’? And who are you, for that matter? What’s this all about?”

“Introductions are in order,” the girl agreed, still checking Banner’s wound. “I’m Rosanne Wittenborn. Tony you already know.”

Banner waved, painfully smirking. Tony sniffed and looked away. Banner took a moment to check out their prison. They were sitting in a thick wooden crate the size of a boxing ring. The wood was crisscrossed so that open spaces one foot square showed through. Beyond them were four solid metal walls, a metal floor, and a metal ceiling.

“Well,” said Rosanne, “I’ll be darned if I can find a major contusion or even a minor break anywhere back here. Even though you were conked hard enough to split a coconut, all you have is a slight bump and a tiny cut. Mister . . .”

“Doctor,” Banner replied automatically, then caught himself. “Doctor . . . Bruce Green.” He’d grown accustomed to using pseudonyms under any circumstance.

“Dr. Green,” sniggered Tony.

“Tony,” Rosanne said threateningly. “Well, Bruce, you seem to be a fellow prisoner.”

“Great,” he replied. “But, again, why? What is going on around here?”

“You should have gotten the gist of it from our dear dead bodyguards,” said Tony. “Our pop the doctor was one of the world’s

great bomb babies."

"Bomb babies?"

"Radiation specialists," Rosanne translated. "Tony thinks that means all Dad knew about was nuclear devices."

"Well, it does mean the big boom in today's world, little sister," Tony retorted smugly. "And back in South Africa, the General wants that expertise very badly."

"The General?"

"Think of the worst despot in history," Rosanne took up with sudden vehemence. "Then change his appearance into that of an obese swine. Next turn him into a crafty, well-spoken, bloodthirsty fool with a gorilla's drive and IQ. Add power, money, and guns and you have the General."

"Not a pretty picture," Banner concurred. "And I suppose he's your father's—and our—captor."

"For sure," said Tony. "And that means we're not long for this world."

"Don't be ridiculous!" cried Rosanne. "Dad would never work for him if we were dead."

"It's all the same in the end," grumbled Tony. "Now that he has us, Dad will do as he says. And once he gets what he wants from him, we'll all be jungle meat. I know that fat madman."

"But where are we?" Rosanne pressed. "I don't feel any movement. I don't smell any fuel. We could still be in the United States."

"It makes no difference," said Tony with finality. "We're prisoners. And we're the General's prisoners. It makes no damned difference anymore."

Agent Matthews brought the jet around in a tight circle. And with this particular jet, that circle was unbelievably tight. The sea shone a beautiful silver under the blazing sun, the small and seemingly innocuous government jet spun above the water, creating an atmospheric whirlpool.

"That's it," said Agent Curtiss. His finely boned forefinger stabbed at the green blinking screen before him.

"You sure?" crackled a low voice over the jet's intercom.

"It's running silent, it's running deep, it has no markings, and it doesn't answer my repeated signals. The U.S. Coast Guard, Navy, and Defense Department know nothing about a submarine in these waters, and it's coming on a direct configuration from the U.N. conflagration. Right timing, too. That's the General's escape vehicle, all right. I'd stake my job on it."

“You will. You are,” came the voice in his ear. “We can’t afford to take chances. We’re deploying a sufficient military force to control the situation. It will arrive in waves: para-scuba forces in ten minutes, submersibles in fifteen, and heavy cutters in twenty. But it’s up to you fellows to hold that sub in our waters. Do you understand the situation? Pour enough ‘persuasion’ into that water so that they surface and stay put.”

Agents Matthews and Curtiss shared a momentary glance through their faceplates. Then Matthews silently whistled to the horizon and Curtiss grinned like a shark.

“Understood,” he replied with gusto.

“See you in ten,” Matthews put in.

Curtiss snapped off the outside communication and returned his eyes to the specially equipped “raynar” screen—a newly developed radar-sonar device.

“What if the enemy were listening in?” asked Matthews at the controls, shaking his head toward the quiet ocean. “I know this jet is one of a kind, but you never know the opposition’s capability.”

“I hope they were,” said Curtiss, like a wolf discussing a large and very well-fed herd of sheep. “So they know exactly what they’re in for. Maybe they’ll even surface without a fight. But, in the meantime, let’s see what this baby can do.”

“You asked for it,” said Matthews with a hint of pride.

And with only a slight move on his part, the comparatively tiny jet simply dropped out of the sky. It did not roll; it slipped over backward and dove like a cliff diver toward the water. Then, with a whisper, it pulled up slightly so that it skimmed over the waves at a height of twenty feet.

In the completely pressurized cabin, Curtiss was hooting like a banshee and Matthews was grinning like a maniac. The plane shot across the sky until its shadow approached the spot where the sonar pegged the sub. Then what looked like four bolts spat out from the jet’s underbelly. The thin bands of yellow snaked into the waves, and then the aircraft was up and spinning around for a second sweep.

Seconds later four rumbling booms rolled into the afternoon air. Then four cones of water pointed to the sky and the sea seemed to bounce. The jet streaked by again, this time dropping eight disks, roughly the size of hockey pucks. These slowly drifted down through the water as the plane zipped back and forth four hundred yards beyond. All eight exploded at once, rocking the sub like a cradle.

“Why don’t we just sink the thing?” asked Matthews, who was a brawny blond with skin like sandpaper.

“Because,” said Curtiss, who looked like a young Warren Beatty, “our job is to make sure the General doesn’t get Wittenborn’s kids back to his own country. Now, if we were sure the kids were on this sub and there was absolutely no way of stopping it, we’d probably have no choice but to sink it. But, until we’re positive, we’ve got to keep it in one place. Think that’s too tough for you?”

“Just watch,” said a grinning Matthews.

The horizon did a flip and the jet was zooming back toward the shaken sub. At that moment several half-balls of light beckoned on the flight board and a panel slid silently open.

“Uh-oh,” said Curtiss. “They’re going to shoot back.”

Several numbers appeared on a screen the panel had uncovered.

“A sea-to-air missile,” continued the brown-haired agent. “Bearing 2023.”

“Groovy,” Matthews drawled. He stabbed a few buttons and turned a dial. The jet immediately banked down and back. A small funnel opened up in the water and a missile shot up. Out of the bottom of the jet came another, smaller missile. For a second, the two projectiles made an upside-down “L” with their vaporing exhausts. Then the sky was obscured by a yellow and orange cloud of fire. The ocean surface wobbled in protest while the jet laughed through the smoke.

“This is almost criminally easy,” said Curtiss.

“Best money can buy,” said Matthews.

“Only takes a year to learn all its tricks,” said Curtiss, remembering the twelve months of training.

“Let’s have these guys surface.”

The jet moved down into its attack position and skimmed the waves, heading at near supersonic speed toward their quarry. As they honed in, a glimmer appeared on the horizon opposite them.

“Whoa!” said Curtiss. “Are we capable of reflecting our own image?”

“Say what?”

Curtiss blinked and tapped his raynar board.

“What is it?” asked Matthews.

“Humph. Never saw anything like this . . .”

“Hey! We don’t have time for your senile mutterings. I’ve already missed one attack approach. What is it, already?”

“Could this baby break the time barrier?”

“Don’t be stupid, man. Spit it out.”

“Well, as impossible as this may seem,” Curtiss finally revealed, “we’re heading right at ourselves.”

Matthews hastily double-checked his own equipment, then pulled out of his reapproach. Their mirror image pulled up at the exact same, but opposite angle.

"Ohmigosh," sputtered Matthews. "There wasn't supposed to be another one of these craft in the world. We were supposed to be the prototype—the one and only!"

"No communication possible," said Curtiss. "Either not answering my signal or, uh, not answering my signal."

The jets tied an invisible bow with their flight paths. Then the mirror image moved into a collision course. The two American pilots pulled back and dipped down to avoid the sudden confrontation.

"One thing's for sure," said Matthews, manipulating madly. "He's not a friendly twin. It seems as if the General's circle of influence is wider than we ever imagined."

Curtiss grew pale inside his airtight outfit. "You mean, that one is owned by . . . it comes from . . . they aim to . . ."

"Yup," said Matthews, feeling much more frightened than he sounded. "Hold tight. Win, lose, or draw, this is going to be quick."

The two craft, equipped with the latest in weaponry, buzzed about each other like angry wasps, occasionally sending their laser strings arching out. As soon as one's weapons had centered on the other, the latter had neutralized the former's with its backups. Each individual move was invisible to the naked eye, but the water's surface gave crackling evidence of the onslaught above it. And, for the moment, the submarine was safe.

"I'll call in," grunted Curtiss.

"No. Need your attention here. If that one gets any edge, we'll be freaking gone. Our one hope is that our training is better. Let's peg this guy!"

Curtiss and Matthews gritted their teeth and moved in again. One moment the sky was filled with their zapping madness; the next moment the red cross-hair fit between the green cross-hair on the blue board. The Americans' jamming devices had a solid connection, and suddenly, in a flash of fire, the enemy jet exploded out.

As the debris settled, Curtiss checked his board's timepiece. The battle had taken all of thirty-two seconds.

"Better living through science," Matthews sighed, breathing for the first time in half a minute. "Now let's really stick it to that sub."

The surviving jet pounded the ocean with a vengeance, pouring in enough firepower to slow a leviathan. The metal hunk beneath the surface did not fare well. It would have to rise or be ripped apart by shock waves.

As the first American cutter appeared on the horizon, the foreign underwater craft chose the safe route and surfaced like a log. It was all black and devoid of markings and it rocked quietly on the waves. By the time the gathered might of the military had encircled it, its black-garbed crew had collected silently on the hull.

Curtiss wanted to yell at someone—anyone. He felt subtlely betrayed by a nation which could build a fabulous defensive weapon, train him for a year to help run it, and then either let spies get the plans or sell them outright. When that enemy jet had appeared, he'd wanted to punch somebody.

Now both he and Matthews, after landing their jet on an aircraft carrier and shedding their protective gear, had demanded to lead the sub boarding party. And both agents, in and out of the sky, were men to be reckoned with—especially when they were angry.

After the military had mopped up the black-garbed prisoners, the C.I.A. men met the sub's captain in the engine room. Curtiss desperately wanted to unleash his tensions, but the captain was of no help.

"What are you doing on my ship?" was the first thing he yelped.

Surprisingly, he was blond, and he should have been tall, but the years of commandeering an underwater craft had left him hunched. Curtiss felt like flooring him then and there, but he kept a cool demeanor.

"Can the games," he said smoothly, moving his compact automatic submachine gun into easy access. "Where are they?"

"Who? What?" cried the captain with a distinct Swedish accent. "Where are which?" he finished, visibly paling as more armed men packed into the little room.

Curtiss moved his sidearm in small patterns in front of the captain's face, like a symphony conductor, and spoke in accompanying metered time.

"A woman. And two men. You stole them. From the U.N."

"We are a test submarine," said the man trying out his last line of rehearsed defense. "A fault in navigation accidentally put us in American waters . . . an unfortunate accident which I'm sure our embassy can straighten out. No need for strong-arm tactics, my fine fellow."

Curtiss swore. The man was purposely stalling for time. But why? The agent decided to draw the charade to a close.

"A test sub? With no markings and a disguised crew? Quit wasting time. You have five seconds to lead us to the Wittenborns or I blow your face off."

The Swede suddenly became very cooperative. Curtiss, Matthews, and their cohorts were led the length and breadth of the ship quickly, but to little avail.

"All right, that's it," spat Curtiss as he rounded his fiftieth corner. He pushed his gun barrel into the back of the captain's head. "You're a dead man."

"No, no, we are here," said the captain in a panic, hastily swinging open a last latch.

Curtiss pushed the man into Matthews' ample arms and looked. In the midst of a large metal room lay a gigantic wooden crate with three people lying inside on a hay mat.

"Hey!" Curtiss called with relief. The three figures didn't move. "Miss Wittenborn!" the agent said louder. No reaction. "Hey! We're here to rescue you."

Finally, one body shook as if chilled and began to roll over. Then the remaining two followed suit, as if just coming out of a long, cold sleep. One was female; the others were men. Two were black; one was white. They were the right height, the right, weight, and had the proper hair color, but one thing was for sure—none of them was Rosanne Wittenborn, Tony Wittenborn, or Bruce Banner.

"Congrats, gentlemen," said the Swede, his voice a verbal smirk. "You have just rescued a New York actor and a husband-and-wife dance team. By now your proper prey are well into international waters." The captain smiled in smug triumph.

Curtiss slowly turned, his expression strangely jolly. He took a moment to gaze at the blandly superior visage before him, then hauled off and buried his fist in the captain's face.

Banner was laughing.

"What the hell are you laughing at?" said Tony, who did not understand the psychological underpinnings of Bruce's mirth. He was stretched out across one side of the box. Rosanne was curled up beside Banner, ostensibly napping, but also showing one well-shaped expanse of leg from beneath her skirt. Banner ignored her beauty by standing with his back to both of them, testing the strength of the timber.

"You must excuse me," he replied, unsuccessfully trying to quell his bitter jocularity. "But I could get us out of here in a minute."

"Yeah, right," said Tony. "What are you going to do? Bore the wood into tinder?"

Banner didn't answer, but kept pulling at the logs.

"What do you mean, Bruce?" said a sleepy voice. He turned to see Rosanne sitting up and innocently rearranging her skirt.

"Nothing. Nothing, really, Miss Wittenborn. I was just blowing off a little steam."

"It's not nothing," she returned. "You said you could get us out of here. What did you mean?" Her steady gaze was sympathetic, but serious, as well. Banner lowered himself down to her eye level.

"Well, my professional specialty is the hidden reserves of strength we all can tap in moments of stress," he explained. "I am also an expert on harnessing the power of radiation."

"Just like our father," said Rosanne with growing awareness.

"Just like your father."

"What?" exploded Tony. "You mean you're a bomb baby, too? This is great—just great! The General is not only going to have Dad under his thumb, but you, too. Well, thank heaven I'm going to be a pampered captive for a while. I sure would hate to be anybody else in the world when that maniac has power like this!"

"Tony, don't make it worse," Rosanne chastised. "Go on, Bruce. What about our hidden resources of strength?"

"All I mean is that in the right set of circumstances I could rip this place apart like toothpicks."

"Hey, great," said Tony. "What would I have to do to put you in the right set of circumstances? Beat you up? Tell dirty jokes? Play 1001 Strings records?"

"It's not as easy as that," Banner replied. "That's the point. I'd have to be pushed to the absolute limit of my patience and endurance. I would have to believe that I was willing to die for something before the necessary power could be unleashed. Indeed, I would have to believe I was going to die."

"Well, hell, that could be arranged," Tony said easily, rising to his full height and approaching threateningly. "I could very realistically convince you and my sweet little sister that you were about to die right this very minute."

"It wouldn't work," said Banner with calm certainty, unmoved by the tall man's words. "None of this is real to me. That slaughter at the U.N. is like a fantasy in my memory now. I don't know what it all meant. It was senseless."

"No wonder you were laughing," said Rosanne with empathy. "You knew all your research didn't do us a bit of good in the real world."

"It's just as well, Miss Wittenborn," reported Bruce. "You must understand that even if I could call up these powers right now, I couldn't control them. I would rip this box apart, but might very well hurt you both without knowing it."

Tony eyed Banner's slight frame. "Fat chance," he muttered.

“Bruce, do me a favor,” said the girl with a touch of exhaustion.

Banner waited for the inevitable request for silence. He had learned early that people just didn’t appreciate their finer points of his Curse. They considered the ability to turn into a raging, mindless powerhouse a blessing.

“Yes?” he said.

“Please,” stressed the Wittenborn girl, “please call me Rosanne.”

Banner smiled in surprise. He suddenly felt an interesting kinship with this brave woman.

At that moment the first movement they had felt since their abduction shook the wood crate. The entire room vibrated for several seconds. Then a jolt threw them into the air. Tony smashed into the opposite grid, Rosanne bounced and rolled to the center of the cage, and Banner found himself sliding forward on his stomach and coming to rest against the girl’s side. The next thing they were aware of was a wheezing laugh.

Three heads turned in the direction it was coming from and six eyes saw a thin man in a highly decorated gray uniform. He stood only a little taller than Banner, but his posture and emaciation lent the impression of great height. His bright gray eyes were magnified by clear aviator glasses, and his severe crewcut was interrupted by a deep scar reaching from above his ear to his jawbone, following a line where his sideburn should have been.

“Ve haff arrived at ze end uf ze furst leg uf our journey,” he said in clipped German tones. “You vill pleeze follow me.”

From behind the man came a dozen black-garbed crew members who began hacking apart one side of the cage with axes and hatchets. The three prisoners moved to the opposite end of the box while the wood chips flew.

“You vill excuse ze sorry lack uf a door!” shouted the thin man. “But ve built zis leetle room around you.”

By then the group had broken through and four men encircled each captive. The uniformed German clicked his heels, spun on one, then stalked out. Banner and the two Wittenborns were given no choice but to follow. They were led through several rooms of modern equipment which literally sparkled. Banner couldn’t help but notice the American brand names stamped on all of them. I.C.M., Stoning International, and Sugarwell computers were built up everywhere.

Finally, they were led outside into blinding sunlight. Each tried to shield his eyes until a semblance of vision returned. Meanwhile, the German humorlessly wheezed. Banner was the first to see that they were on the deck of a sleekly beautiful ocean cutter which floated on

a sparkling, calm sea. All around them were the latest in technological advances. They had been transferred by a well-organized, well-trained group of professionals onto a brutally modern ocean-going craft of some sort.

"Where are we?" asked Rosanne, still shielding her eyes. "What is this?"

"Zis," said the German, "is a sea-vorthy hovercrafft. Und I vould prefer to answer all your questions after ve make ze nezezzary transfer."

The three were shepherded to the side of the ship, where another boat waited. The two ships were as different as a filet mignon and a dead cow. While their initial prison had been on a beautifully maintained craft equipped with futuristic outfittings, their next transport was a black, smoke-belching wreak of a wooden tub, complete with bananas.

And while the crew members of the former were well-developed examples of black-garbed manhood, the men who populated the latter had uniforms of stained, torn undershirts, bandannas and patchwork pants, and expressions of sullen hatred combined with evil anticipation.

"You vill stand zere, yes?" said the German, pointing to a patch of deck directly opposite a large winch on the facing banana boat. Suddenly their guards sprouted guns and the three had no choice but to walk to the spot where the German was pointing.

"A little to ze right," he said. "Zere! Vonderfull. Perfect! Now just relax. Loozen up, pleeze. Nozzing to vorry about . . ."

The German gave a sign and the air was filled with a whooshing sound. Then Banner heard the winch's engine turn on, and suddenly he was flying through the air, feet first. He heard Rosanne scream and Tony swear as he spun head first above the water. He felt himself falling and the ocean filled his vision. He closed his eyes and tried to pull his arms up, but they were somehow pinned to his sides. Just before he was about to smash into the sea, what seemed to be a gentle hand covered his body and held him, swaying, just above the water's edge.

Banner heard the banana boat's winch complain, and then he felt himself rising. He opened his eyes to see that he was covered with a fine mesh sack which was attached to netting connected to the other boat's winch. The vibrating and bumping they had felt earlier in the wooden chamber must have been the two crews setting up this little surprise. They were certainly getting good mileage out of it. Both decks were lined with laughing sailors.

Banner turned his head and saw both his fellow captives likewise

stuck in clear, heavy-duty Baggies. They were all being slowly pulled aboard the wooden ship to the accompanying song of naval mirth.

"You musst forgive us!" shouted the German. "It has been a long trip. Ve could not resist haffing a leetle fun."

The fun continued as the trio was raised over the banana boat's hold and then lowered onto a layer of crates twenty feet inside. Several hands appeared to hack the mesh from the netting, and the three spent the next few minutes unwrapping themselves. Smelly sailors encircled the hold's square opening and pelted them with coarse remarks and fruit.

Banner heard the German shout a farewell, and then a deep, husky voice responded. He then helped Rosanne from her sack as catcalls and whistles filled the air. Bruce helped her to her feet, getting a tight smile as thanks. Tony had already risen and started snarling insults back at the dull faces above them.

Another kind of face appeared. It was a wide face, completely encircled by a black-and-gray-tinged beard. The thick mop of hair was the same combination of colors, but the eyes were brown and intelligent. This new person barked some words in a foreign language and suddenly the barrage of chatter stopped. The face then returned its attention to the three below.

"You are hungry," he said as a command. "I will see to it. Do not fight and everything will be fine. Wait quietly and I will come for you."

Minutes later they were given a makeshift tour of their new jail. Their host was Russian. He spoke, moved, and acted like a bear—a shambling, big man who seemed gentle but probably had a deep well of violence rumbling just below the surface. He had to have, Banner reasoned, especially given the caliber of crew aboard the ship. None of them had been able to look at him and Tony with anything but derision—and no one had been able to look at Rosanne with anything but lust. To keep these animals in line, the bear had to be very powerful, indeed.

The ship mirrored its captain and crew. Outwardly slovenly, its rotted exterior covered an engine of quiet power and steering of easy mobility. Even though it seemed to be in slum-like disrepair, there was no rotten smell and Banner could not spy one insect or rodent, even in the deepest bowel of the boat—where their new quarters lay.

It was all just a cover, Banner realized. The impression of inferiority was all that was needed to avert suspicion. Banner's supposition was verified by the Russian himself as they settled down in the eating quarters, a simple, self-contained box lined with wooden tables and long, backless benches. Their meal was a thick stew of unknown

origin served in coarse wooden bowls.

"Contrary to what you may already believe," said the bearded man, "you have been held captive for several days. You were kept unconscious and fed intravenously while being moved out of American waters."

"How did you do it?" inquired Banner while the Wittenborns glowered on. "With all the U.S. power on the lookout, how did you manage to slip by? I would think that no plane, boat, train, or car would miss being paid attention to."

The Russian leaned back and barked a harsh laugh, slapping the table with one large hand.

"That is the point!" he roared. "No transport did escape attention. But you must understand the psychology of your searchers. When they are about to embark on a mission, they separate their thought processes into two camps—'them,' and 'us.' The 'them' are the enemy, and the 'us' are the good guys. Now, have you ever heard the quaint Western expression, 'Who will police the policemen?' "

"Yeah," said Tony. "So?"

"So what happens when the 'them' are one of 'us'?"

The Russian looked at three blank faces as the surrounding ten armed guards rocked with laughter.

"Do you not see?" exclaimed the Russian with relish. "You were taken off the initial seaplane by one of the United States's own Coast Guard cutters staffed with bribed and turncoated militia, then moved to an American Navy hovercraft, piloted by our German friend. While he was sailing the open sea, stopping other 'suspicious' ships for searching, you were in his hold all the time. It was just a matter of slipping into international waters and delivering you to us. The General has a wider range of influence than anyone can imagine."

After the Russian had finished speaking, Tony leaned back, picked up his bowl, and hurled it into the face of the guard sitting to his left. Then his elbow shot back into the man who was sitting to his right. With a mighty heave, he pushed the table over on the four guards sitting opposite him. Suddenly, the quiet room was turned into an inferno of roaring men. Tony roared louder than any of them.

"You're not getting me! I'm not going back to the madman! Not me!"

He punched the first guard he saw with all the strength of his nearly seven feet of bone and muscle. The man danced back like a broken rag doll. The second charging guard received a kick in the stomach. He flipped over like a dropped boomerang. The last two men were felled by a swinging stool. It bounced off the face of one and hit the other

just above his left ear. Both dropped like cut trees.

Tony hopped over their bodies right into the outstretched fist of the Russian. The air was immediately knocked out of him and he stumbled back a few yards. The captain put one large boot on a nearby bench and stomped down. The other end of the wooden plank shot up and caught Tony on the chin with a loud smack. Rosanne shrieked before her brother slammed to the floor with all the stinging power of a bad belly flop.

The captain had yet to utter a word or change his bemused expression.

By the time Tony hit the dirt, the first two guards caught by his sudden onslaught were back on their feet.

“Bring him down to solitary,” said the Russian calmly, vaguely motioning toward the still form. “And lock him in tight.”

He turned to where Rosanne and Banner still sat in shock. “As for you two, let this be a small lesson. Even if he had gotten out of this room, there are many more men outside the door, and beyond them are a jungle and a beast-infested river. The end of your voyage would be far more pleasant with us.

“Understand,” he continued, in an affable tone, “Miss Wittenborn would never be allowed to throw her life away. We have been instructed to break both her lovely legs if she should try.

“But you”—he turned toward Banner—“whoever you are, we’re not sure where you got the General’s card or even if he intends to see you at all. Until we get further orders, you are as safe as the lovely lady and her hyperactive brother. But, if for some reason we should see fit to feed you, bit by scrawny bit, to the alligators, I don’t think it would even ruin our appetites.”

The captain turned around to see Tony being borne out on the shoulders of four men. The remaining six were groggily rising to their feet.

“All right, you pansies!” the Russian shouted. “See if you can take the other two to their quarters without knocking yourselves out.”

He turned back to face his two stunned captives. “C’mon, kiddies,” he said in a perfectly flat Midwest American accent. “Beddy-bye time.”

Five

“It just wasn’t like him,” she said. “It just wasn’t like him at all.”

Banner turned over so he could hear her better. “I have never seen Tony raise a hand against anyone, let alone a room full of hired killers. To see that practiced wimp suddenly turn into a raging prizefighter was almost beyond belief.”

“Like I was saying before,” said Banner softly, “everyone has an inner reserve of strength. They just need a certain moment of stress to set it off.”

The two were sitting in a wooden hole approximately the size of a large den. Instead of the slats that had enclosed them before, the room had one metal door, locked from the outside. Their carpeting consisted of two large mattresses which had seen better days. There were a small sink and toilet behind a plain wooden partition. Otherwise, there was no light, no air conditioning, no color TV, and no room service. Tony was nowhere to be found.

They sat in silence for a while. Neither could imagine what his future would be. To Rosanne, it was all a nightmare not yet taking form. All she really knew of the General was the awful stories her father had told her of his irrationality and viciousness, of his executions on a whim, of his secret police and his continual thirst for power and demand for respect. The thirst could be quenched through money and violence, but respect, the demand for it, could never be satisfied, except through play-acting. Was she actually under the influence of such a monster?

As for Bruce, this seemed only a fantasy to him. Even with his incredible Curse, he could not fully grasp that he was involved in this wild plot: a maniacal dictator's plan to secure the greatest thermonuclear, neutron, and gamma specialist in the world; a General whose minions included professional criminals of seemingly every nationality; a man with enough influence to have at least one of every type of sea, land, and air-borne armament in the world. How did he, Banner, get swept up in all this? Where *did* the Hulk get that card? How would he get out of it? For a split second a horrible image swept into his mind: he saw a terribly enraged face of green. Its expression was a horrible combination of hatred and childlike bewilderment. In tandem, these two emotions created a legitimately frightening aura of limitless brutality and total moral ignorance. Banner choked on the vision for a moment, and then, thankfully, it was gone.

"Bruce? Are you all right?"

"Yes . . . I'm fine. Just exhausted, I guess. Confused."

"Yes. So am I."

Silence encircled the room again.

"Bruce?"

"Yes?"

"Could you . . . could you hold me?" The voice was quiet, but not childlike at all in its intensity.

Banner moved over to where the voice came from and put his arms around Rosanne. She wrapped her arms around his waist and settled her head on his chest. They both half-sat and half-lay very comfortably in the stifling room.

"Bruce," Rosanne finally said, "what would it take to tap our hidden reserves? How can we get out of here?"

Banner felt a lump of bitterness growing in his throat. The unknown beyond the darkness of their prison created awful pictures of what might be. And he could sense his total inability to do anything about it.

"It's just not possible," he whispered. "None of this is real enough yet. We've been kidnapped, but we haven't been physically confronted with danger yet. It's just the anticipation of that danger we've had to face. Your brother must have been more aware of our fate than I am. Nothing . . . nothing means enough yet. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I think I do," she sighed. "It's like going to a horror movie and then walking home at night. You're ready for the vampire to come jumping out and you're scared out of your wits, but you keep walking and somehow you get home."

"And right now we're waiting for the vampire to jump out," said

Bruce.

"But . . . but I don't think I'll ever get home." On the last word Rosanne's voice cracked and she began to cry quietly.

Her tears stopped and her arms tightened convulsively around him as they heard the lock being unbolted from outside. The door swung silently outward and four or five men appeared, silhouetted by their own flashlights. One arm moved up and shone the light directly in Banner's face.

"You," said a thick voice. "Come. The captain wants to see you."

Banner tried unsuccessfully to seal his eyes from the glare, but he managed to say, "I'm staying right here."

As soon as he spoke, one of the shadowy bunch split off and hustled over to where the two sat. Rough hands pulled at both of them. Then Banner felt himself being lifted up and a sharp metal point was jabbed under his chin. He heard the girl cry out once. Then there was a heavy thud and some quick scuffling. He tried to look down, but the sharp edge at his throat kept his head directly in line with the beam of the flashlight.

"Quiet, the two of you," said the foreign voice. "Man come to captain. Woman stay."

The pressure of the weapon under his jaw directed Banner toward the door. The scuffling behind him had not stopped, but it was cut off by the door silently being shut behind him.

"Hurry," came a voice into his ear. "We go. No noise." The point of the knife was now in the back of his neck. Hands still held him at his elbows and shoulders, and the small group began moving hurriedly down a dark passageway. Only a few dozen yards down, they stopped again, and one of the flashlight-carrying forms opened another door.

"In."

"What are you doing with that girl?" Banner barked.

His reply came in the form of a solid blow to his stomach. He fell back against a bulkhead wall and tried to catch his breath. Another knife appeared at his throat.

"No talk. In," said the attacker.

Suddenly the entire boat lurched. The knife scratched across his neck and his assailant fell sideways, cursing. Flashlight beams bounced about as the other crew members tried to keep their balance. Banner saw his opportunity, and, with a yell, he grabbed one of the flashlights from a stumbling man and sped down the corridor. He felt like shouting at the top of his lungs, but he locked his teeth together. He didn't dare raise an alarm before he could see what chance he had at escaping and bringing help. And since his escort had been so intent

on silence, he did not think they would risk attracting attention, either.

Banner bounded down the dark halls until his flashlight beam spied a closed latch. He quickly turned off the light and spun the door open. The next moment he found himself on the upper deck of the banana boat. The ship was running along what seemed to be a river, although Banner could not definitely spot land. His only clue to his whereabouts was some far-off glimmers of fire which could have marked the shores. These and the moonlight were the only forms of illumination. The ship itself was making headway without the use of its on-board lights.

Bruce ran across the upper deck and slid down a ladder to the main deck area. He stopped for a moment and listened carefully. He heard no movement on or below deck—not even an engine chattering. The only sounds were of the water wake slapping against the hull and the faraway beating of what sounded like a drum.

This only compounded the mystery for Banner. Where were they and why were they proceeding so cautiously? He suddenly decided it was best not to take chances in the water, so he opened his mouth and screamed at the top of his lungs.

"Hellllllp! Somebody, please hellllllp!"

His first answer was a deep, choking noise to his left. He turned and flashed his light in that direction. Caught in the beam was a long spear, vibrating in the wood of the upper deck. The next second the sky was filled with whistles and both decks began sprouting wood and stone poles. The air was literally brimming with hurled spears. Banner shouted in surprise and stumbled back to the upper-deck ladder. The place where he had just been standing began to look like a petrified porcupine.

From east and west came a literal forest of sharp shafts and loud animal-like yowling. Out in the darkness, dozens of flames suddenly sprouted up, illuminating a line of boldly painted, nearly Neanderthal natives who leaped, hurled weapons, and bayed at the moon. Banner felt as if he had just been dropped into a Tarzan movie. But he was no Johnny Weissmuller, and these were not props coming at him.

Like a madman he raced to the upper-deck doorway. Just before he reached it, it swung open and the crew began pouring out, already firing automatic rifles as they went. Banner spun and fell forward as the men began mowing down the spear-throwing natives. Banner heard more gunfire from the deck below, then realized that the entire ship was out, defending itself against the attack he had started. No wonder they had been moving silently! Once the natives knew where they were, war parties of all shapes and sizes would be mounted.

Banner felt a tugging at his feet. Just as he was about to turn over, his ankles were grabbed and he was pulled back inside the ship. The next moment he was being pummeled. Fists were beating wildly at his body and head and a Russian-accented voice roared in his ears.

"Fool! Idiot!"

The ineffective beating quickly stopped and a hamlike fist grasped his shirtfront. He was lifted to his feet as if he were as light as a rag doll. His entire vision was filled with the snarling face of the captain.

"You swine! You have just brought down on us the entire tribal population! This is Africa, dog! Central Africa, where the Congo empties out and the primitive gods still reign! A place of unlimited heat and rain! The only creatures stronger than the pygmies are the lion, the ape, and the rhino! This is what you've brought on our heads. Right now they're moving to the dams and falls to massacre us as we pass."

As he spoke, his big, dark face grew increasingly purple and his fists shook. Sweat dropped on Banner's shirt like Rosanne's tears.

The Russian spun around and spat orders to his minions in another language, then returned his attention to the American doctor, all without releasing his grip on Banner's collar.

"Now the General will have to airlift us if he still considers Wittenborn's children important. We cannot chance moving through the forest any longer. But you . . . whoever you are . . . you shall not get away with this! You shall be the sacrifice to buy us some tribal time. Let the natives play with your bones rather than ours."

Hardly flexing his muscles, the Russian hurled Banner into the arms of four burly crew members. They each cuffed and kicked him, while tying a thick, coarse rope around his neck. Two men then pulled him back by the rope while the remaining two held his arms.

Banner, dazed and damaged, vainly tried to regain his wits. "Wait!" he cried. "The girl! They're attacking the girl! That's . . . that's why . . ."

"They're attacking all of us," the captain rumbled. "You saw to that, fool. Make your last words important, man. Leave this world with a truth on your lips."

Banner sought to explain, even to beg for mercy from this brutal justice, but a man pulled the rope taut, choking off his words. As he fell to his knees with the pain, he realized his assailant was one of the same men who had just been with him in the hold. Even during the native attack, especially during the attack, his friends were having their way with Rosanne Wittenborn! A part of him screamed in rage at their brutality while another part of him choked and began to die.

The roaring orange pain and the black anger filled his head like a balloon. He felt light and empty. His eyes, smarting from lack of oxygen, saw the other end of the rope around his neck being tied to a heavy crate. Two men picked up the box and began to swing it back and forth. Two more men held back Banner's arms.

"On the count of three," he heard the Russian say. "One . . ."

There was a tug at his subconscious.

"Two . . ."

The floodgates opened.

"Three!"

A door on the side of the ship was pulled inward. The crate was hurled out. Banner's legs ran after it so his neck would not snap. His shoes hit solid wood for two steps as the shoreline fires blazed into his pupils. Then the stars spun above him and a wave slapped the top of his head as the crate splashed into the river. The water rolled over his entire body and sucked him down. He didn't feel the long tug at his throat. He didn't feel the water rush into his nostrils and fill his mouth. All he felt was slightly sick to his stomach. Bruce Banner sank into the heart of the Congo weighted down by a crate filled with dirt.

The banana boat's crew continued firing on the tribesmen, who died valiantly, hurling their spears and shooting their arrows into the ship. It seemed as if the entire area was ablaze with the shouts of the men, the cries of the forest beasts, and the angry chatter of submachine-gun fire. But the entire jungle stilled as a heavy rumble rolled out from beneath the waves, and a small fountain of water and cloth spewed up, emitting a clapping boom. Some natives later raved that the river god, in his anger, had unleashed a demon. The Russian captain at that moment had whirled, thinking that one of his slimy crew had smuggled grenades aboard. But when the gunshots continued unabated, he thought no more about it. He had to work fast. He hoisted up his boots and ran for the radio room.

He was alive, but it was dark and he couldn't breathe. He couldn't stand up or walk, either. He tried to place the feeling. It was like when he was sleeping, but it didn't feel peaceful. It was not good—it would kill him if he stayed here. He swung his head up and saw a dark shape above him. His mind shook and told him: "There!" The mighty legs straightened, hit the river bottom, and the huge body shot up.

The Russian was hurled forward by a sudden jolt. He flew along for several yards, then found his footing, only to be thrown back by another jolt. This time the floor came up to meet him. He slid back to his original starting point while the ship's lights began flickering. He

placed both his hands on the walls and pulled himself up. Another sudden jolt sent him up farther, and his skull smacked into the ceiling. He crumpled to the floor on his haunches once more, holding his head and cursing. “Those were no grenades!

“What in blazes is going on?” he roared.

Above the shape there was air, he knew. He felt it the first time he hit the shape. It moved up and he could breathe. Then it came down again, pushing him under. He pushed back up with his whole body and it got out of the way again. But it did not stay there, so he pushed once more, harder. It slapped down again, harder. He was really angry now. He wanted to breathe. He was going to breathe—now!

The Russian moved down the steps to the hold, where the pounding was coming from. The crates lining the area were bounced all over the place. Bananas had scattered about the area, leaving a ripe stench. The captain splashed his flashlight around the room searching for an errant gorilla or a drunken crew member. His light beam finally settled on an empty patch of floor. As he watched, a massive, green right arm came through it.

The accompanying shaft of water knocked the Russian from the steps, flat across a pile of boxes which lazily leaned over and then crashed down. From the center of the hole the arm disappeared, only to be replaced, after a rending explosion, by another. It, too, was built like a battering ram and was totally green. A half a foot of water already covered the hold bottom. The captain shook his head and stared up as the top half of a green humanoid giant filled the ragged hole in the floor, cutting off the fountain for a second.

Then the pressure pushed the monster up completely. A ponderous expanse of green feet slammed down to the floor, and the gigantic Hulk began trashing the place. The Russian stared in amazement as one fist went through the bulkhead like a sword through a curtain. The resulting gush of water caught the beast full in the face, but he only reared back and laughed. His exclamation was a raspy, robust exultation of achievement and power. The Hulk blasted another fist through the wall, caught a handful of bubbling, wet froth, and rubbed his face with it. He turned. The face was living, shining animosity. The hair was matted ivy tweed. The pupils were silver dots and the eyes shone with the color of envy.

With an honest shout of terror, the Russian began to struggle toward the steps. The Hulk decided to help him. He moved through the now four feet of water as easily as he would through swaths of silk, and one green fist grasped the captain’s shirt. With a small heave,

the Russian felt himself being shot out of the water and up the fifteen feet to the opening. He tumbled across the deck and struggled to his feet.

"What? What is it?" shouted his first mate at him. A moment later, he and the rest of the crew found out. There was a tearing crack, followed by a veritable volcano of wood chips. Rising out of the deck came a green inferno of acrimony. The first two crew members he could get his hands on knew what it was like to fly for a full fifteen seconds. Then they hit the water with the force of two sacks of concrete. The next obstruction the Hulk found in his way was the upper deck. It was not in his way for long. Two arms moved back and the entire green body moved forward. The facing wall spun apart like a rotten avocado caught in an electric blender.

Light from the ship's interior spilled out, and once again the air was filled with the whipping of wooden and stone shafts. The silhouetted crew made easy targets for the surviving tribesmen. By the time they reached their guns, it was too late. The boat was floundering and the men were bleeding pincushions.

The Hulk blasted through one wooden wall after another, joyfully crunching machinery in his hands like peanut brittle.

This boat . . . this ship . . . this shape . . . there was something about it . . . something pulling at his memory . . . not something he remembered . . . somebody! There was somebody here who he had to see—not the man with the beard . . . someone smaller. A beautiful face filled the Hulk's thoughts. It was dark and gentle and pixie-like—the face of an angel. The Hulk had to find her and save her from the man with the beard.

The Hulk felt better. He wasn't confused. He thought of the face of his angel; he had to find her and help her. As he moved again, a lantern near his shoulder shattered. He turned around to see the Russian with a smoking pistol in his hand. His other hand held the ship's railing as it tilted toward its doom. The Hulk growled once as the captain aimed more carefully. Then the captain's eyes grew wide, his mouth opened, and he dropped the gun. He fell forward a moment later with a spear shaft buried deep in his back.

The Hulk turned back to the stairs leading below. Cries of horror drifted up from there and he thought he heard a woman. Without thinking, he launched himself, feet first, down the opening. Only the six-foot layer of water prevented him from smashing all the way through the bottom again. From his eight-foot height, he saw floundering men paddling toward him. With his two fists, he brought his weight down on top of the water. The resulting wave threw the struggling men back to the other end of the passage.

He moved forward to the only metal door along the way. He felt the rushing water pounding at his back, and he didn't want it to hurt his angel. So he tore at the upper part of the door and the ceiling. Soon he had made a four-foot hole in the wall above the water level. Inside he saw his angel desperately treading water and gasping for air. Immediately, he catapulted himself upward, breaking a new hole in the roof in the process. He moved two feet onto the upper deck, spears bouncing off him, and sank his fists into the floor.

He tore away at the deck as men died around him and the shore natives howled their bloodlust. After a few seconds he had made a hole big enough to pull the girl through. As his tremendous palms encircled her shoulders, she collapsed against them with a gasping sigh. The Hulk rose with her in his arms, a sodden beauty held gently by a strange beast in a strange land. Their colors melded in the blue moonlight and the Hulk straightened up to his full height, calling out with triumph in his harsh voice.

The natives watched as their arrows, darts, and spears bounced off his body. They watched as the last crewman died under their onslaught. They watched as the boat sank with the Hulk still on it, holding the unconscious girl, roaring in raucous delight all the way.

Six

“Agent Curtis, Bradford?”

“Yes.”

“C.I.A. 064-122-6?”

“Yes.”

“Please sit down.”

Agent Curtiss, Bradford, settled into the orange-covered armchair on the silent rollers. Before him was a plain wood table on which a dark plastic speaker rested.

“Have you eaten?” asked a voice emitting from the speaker.

“No. No, I haven’t. Actually, this call interrupted my meal, heh, heh.”

“In the commissary?” inquired the speaker voice authoritatively.

“Well, yes.”

“What table?”

“Um, I’m not sure. Uh, I think it was the one . . . by the window.”

“Table eight?”

“Eight? I think so. Yes, I guess so.”

“We’ll send it up. You can eat it while you listen.”

There followed a long, uncomfortable silence. Finally, a stone-faced man entered the otherwise empty room with a tray. The steaming meal was set before Curtiss, plate by plate, and then the man left with the tray under his arm.

“We couldn’t find your original meal,” apologized the voice from the machine on the table. “So we made up a new one. You don’t mind, do you?”

“No.”

“You’re not too full, I hope.”

“No, not really.”

“If this new meal is not to your liking, we can change it.”

“No, that’s all right.”

“Roast beef all right?”

“Yes.” Curtiss nodded. “Fine.”

“Coffee?”

“Yes,” replied the agent, touching the styrofoam cup filled with dark lukewarm liquid. “It’s all right.”

“You can have tea if you’d like.”

“No,” said Curtiss, wondering what the hell was going on. “Coffee is okay.”

“Good, good,” came the voice from the speaker. Again silence filled the room. Curtiss waited to see what banality his superior would announce next. “Please eat,” the voice finally commanded. The agent responded by digging in.

The machine remained quiet in a nearly maternal way for a bit. Then the man on the end of a microphone somewhere in the maze of offices cleared his throat.

“Ahem. Agent Curtiss,” he continued, “we have a sticky situation here.”

Curtiss raised his head from his plate. “What’s that, sir?”

“This African thing with the Wittenborns.”

“Oh, yes,” the agent agreed, returning his attention to his mashed potatoes. They were the real thing, not the flakes. That was unusual for the Agency cafeteria.

“You understand”—the voice interrupted his thoughts—“that the vital lever the General is looking for with these children must not be allowed.”

“Wumph?” Curtiss mumbled around a hunk of beef.

“That is, we cannot allow the man in question to blackmail Wittenborn into cooperation.”

Curtiss shook his head. The meat was really tender. That, too, was a surprise.

“But we cannot overtly approach him. A move like that at this time would be disastrous.”

"Yes, sir," said the agent, swallowing.

"But the children and Wittenborn must never deliver to the General the necessary power."

"Of course not." The meal was really excellent. Curtiss hadn't had a meal like this for months.

"But the problem cannot be rectified through normal channels."

Curtiss stopped eating. He suddenly began to understand what he was doing there. He hurriedly put his fork down and pushed his chair back.

"What am I doing in here alone?" he asked.

"Curtiss . . ."

"Why are you telling me alone?"

"We cannot send in a squad . . ."

"How about a team?"

"Even that would be too dangerous."

"What about the double agents or the sleeping agents already on the scene?"

"They need . . . an outside valve . . . an . . . enforcer, implementer."

Curtiss stared at his plate. "Oh, boy," he said.

"They will lay the groundwork for you, but you must move in during the actual maneuver. It must be just one man. You are one of the only men with the necessary talents and training."

"So I just happened to pull the short straw, huh?" Curtiss continued to stare at his plate.

"A computer chose you as the best man for the job," said the voice with what seemed to be a tinge of hurt.

Curtiss breathed deeply a few times, then sighed and shrugged. He continued eating. Even the vegetables weren't soggy. "All right," he said between mouthfuls. "This is what I signed on for, I guess. When do I leave?"

"Immediately. Agent Matthews will air-drop you."

"All right. Just let me finish my meal, huh?"

"Certainly."

Curtiss mopped up the remainder of the gravy with a Parker House roll which wasn't stale. He thought about his new mission. It was the old suicide number. The Agency needed a madman—a well-prepared, killing machine of a madman. Probably even as he ate, records were being prepared. They would conclusively prove that Bradford Curtiss had never even heard of the American Government. Probably his first-grade teacher would swear that he was anti-Africa. So when he went nuts in the General's headquarters and quite possibly murdered

somebody, it would be the fault of one lone crazy and not a purposeful arm of international law. Those were the breaks. He had a simple choice. Either attempt the impossible and succeed, or let the worst scourge in the world gain a nuclear secret sufficient to destroy the planet. Some choice.

Curtiss finished the last crumb on his plate. As he pushed himself away from the table, he suddenly realized why the supper was so good. Even the doomed were always allowed a last meal.

"Bruce . . . Bruce, please wake up."

Banner felt like tiny sheets of flypaper were stuck onto his eyes. With an effort, he tore them open.

"Oh, thank heavens. Are you all right?" the voice asked.

His body felt like a sack of dirty socks and his head felt like the wicker hamper they'd been thrown in.

"Sampasumb," he replied with lips of lead.

His entire body ached with a wet heat. He had never felt this bad waking up from the Change. It seemed like he was wrapped in a taco, but the yellow glare that had been filling his vision cleared somewhat when a cool cloth wiped his face. Holding the cloth was a delicate, dark hand, and attached to that was a smooth shapely arm. The arm led to a torso of tight, feminine beauty, and perched atop all the preceding was the concerned face of Rosanne Wittenborn. Her hair was pulled back from her face by a rag tied around her now loose black curls. Because of the heat, her gauze top clung to her skin, creating a very attractive, if somewhat humid, package. To Banner at that moment, she was more than a beauty—she was something out of a dream. He reached up and felt her face.

"Bruce," she said, "it's been more than three hours . . ." On the word "three" a powerful image slammed into Banner's consciousness. It was him with a rope around his neck sinking in a black pit, surrounded by bear-like faces laughing. The Russian . . . the boat . . . the spears . . . the knife at his throat—all came pouring back in a jumble. Banner leaped up in fear and ran two steps.

"The General!" he said.

"Don't worry, Bruce," the girl soothed, coming up behind him and putting her hand on his arm. "We're safe . . . for now."

Banner looked around clearly for the first time. They were standing in a small patch of clear ground on the banks of a muddy river. On all other sides of them was a massively dense collection of trees, vines, and other related growths. This was nothing the doctor had ever experienced. He put his face in his hands.

“Whew!” he gasped.

“It’s an African forest,” Rosanne explained, sinking to her knees on the riverbank. “We’re in the General’s domain now.”

Banner turned to her. “But the boat . . . the Russian captain . . . how . . . what . . . ?”

“I’m not sure. All I remember are those men taking you away and their stink as they . . . fought for me.”

Banner tried to order his mind as he kneeled next to the woman. “Uh, did they . . . I mean . . . are you . . . all . . . I mean . . .”

Surprisingly, Rosanne laughed. “Bruce, you’re blushing!” Then, gently, she explained, “No, some ruckus on the deck drew their attention elsewhere. The next thing I remember is the room filling up with water.” Her face clouded over. “Bruce . . . what happened? How did we get here? Where’s the banana barge?”

Banner turned away and looked at the calm river, flowing peaceably beneath a blazing morning sun. He rose and put his hands on his waist. His palms touched sun-burned flesh. He looked down at himself. All he had on was a tattered pair of blue pants. The heat had shrunk the waistband back into a semblance of fitting. He could make an educated guess as to where their captors went.

“The boat is gone, Rosanne. So’s the Russian. So’s the crew,” he intoned like the voice of doom. “Probably dead. I got them killed . . . or maybe killed them myself.” He stared across the placid water. The girl watched in wonder as his face downshifted into a look of pure hateful hopelessness. She could hardly believe it. She rose and approached.

“No offense, Bruce, but I don’t see how . . .” She stopped, then tried again. “How could you have killed all those . . . and sank . . .” She tried to frame the right words one more time. “Bruce, you’re confused . . . tired . . . oh . . .” Finally, she put her hands on his shoulders. “Even if you did, you did us all a favor. Those terrible men deserved to die.”

“It’s not like that,” said Banner, still staring off in the other direction. “It’s . . . it’s just not like that.”

Rosanne took her hands away. She looked at the back of Banner’s head. She looked at the river. She looked back at the jungle. Then she sank to her haunches and began to cry.

Banner turned, stared at her quietly for a moment, then moved over next to her. He put his arms around her waist and they leaned back. In a matter of minutes, they were both asleep in the shade of a tulip tree.

“All set, buddy?” asked agent Blondie Matthews.

"Yeah, I guess so," said Curtiss.

They were both back in their completely self-reliant outfits aboard their supposedly prototypal aircraft, readying for takeoff. Once they got into the air they would maintain total radio silence. This would mean that they couldn't speak at all, since normal conversation meant setting up a common link between the two pressurized uniforms. In a matter of a few hours, Curtiss would be automatically ejected, and his parachute would lower him into the forest eight hundred miles from the General's kingdom. Then he would have to move through a bit of desert, a chunk of semi-arid land, a wide expanse of tropical cities, and on into the heart of the jungle.

"How does it feel to you?" asked Matthews. He wasn't talking about the weather.

"Not great," said Curtiss.

"I'll be waiting to get you out when you're ready," said Matthews.

"Hey, well, you were always accommodating, you know. Thanks."

"Brad, you're one of the best. You'll make it."

"Yeah. Yeah, well, so are you. I'll see you, then."

"Yeah, well, right. Ready?"

"Yeah. Let's go."

"Was it that hidden reserve of strength you were talking about before?"

"It was. It must've been."

Banner and Rosanne were sitting a little way into the forest. When they woke up again, night had nearly fallen and both were ravenously hungry. Thankfully, they were able to find dozens of bananas which had washed ashore from the boat wreck. After gorging themselves on the fruit, they found an almost dry spot and settled in to try to figure out what had happened. Even though it was still oppressively hot, Rosanne lay comfortably on Banner's stomach and he held her while they spoke.

"And you can't remember anything?"

"Things come in fits and starts. It certainly doesn't help that everything's so alien here. I just don't have anything to compare my visions with."

"Please, Bruce, try. What happened after they threw you off the boat? How did I get out? Did you see Tony? Did you see what happened to anyone else?"

"I've tried. I've spent my whole life trying to remember, but nothing comes! Oh, Lord. I don't know, Rosanne; the tribesmen could have

taken the men away. The river could have swept them downstream. I just don't know!"

She brought both hands to his chest and looked into his eyes, searching for a memory that wasn't there. "It's all right. It's all right. I'm just so confused, too. It's so dark and frightening." She sank down against him again. "Oh, Bruce, will it be all right again?"

Banner looked down at the petite, civilized creature in his arms. Her body was still and her gaze never wandered. Even in these totally hostile and hopeless surroundings, she did not succumb to hysteria. He realized that she was trying to calm him, as well as herself, with the questions. She was trying to build him up after his shattered behavior during the whole horrible escapade. He vowed to move with certainty from that point on, regardless of his fear of the Change.

"It will be all right," he heard himself say, not completely believing it. "It will be all right. I swear it."

Suddenly Banner saw a savage reptilian head laughing in his face. The next moment the huge, oily, coiled thing fell upon him. Banner heard Rosanne's scream. Then he was covered with a living, wet tubing which wrapped itself around his face. His arms flailed under the multicolored beam of sinewy muscle, and then a pressure unlike any he had ever experienced nearly crushed his head and chest.

Rosanne saw the boa constrictor slap across Banner's face before she rolled away in horror. She screamed and cried as it drew its heavy body across him. Desperately trying to help, she hurled rocks, twigs, and bananas at the thing as it calmly encircled Banner's every limb and squeezed, hissing. Finally, she found a heavy stick and she ran forward, pounding at the snake with all her might.

Her ears filled with an otherworldly snapping sound and the boa suddenly leaped at her as if propelled by a giant slingshot. She screamed once more and fell to the ground, writhing to avoid its grasp. She heard it crash in the underbrush beyond, then hurriedly got to her feet and tightened her grip on the branch.

"Bruce," she rasped, "Bruce, are you all right?"

A deep growl behind her was her answer.

She felt the blood drain out of her face. Dreading the thought of what she might see, she turned toward the new sound. Standing before her was a gargantuan green man, his body and face twisted in a magnificently muscled pose of defiance. With a great show of willpower, she managed not to faint. With even greater restraint, she resisted running into the jungle screaming. Instead, she stood perfectly still and stared.

The monster stared back, and relief covered the initially angry expression. He had awakened to his angel. He must have been reborn

to help his angel get out of more trouble. Broadening his shoulders, the Incredible Hulk smiled. Rosanne watched incredulously as the crater-marked face magically took on the innocent expression of a baby being tickled. The effect was stunning. This eight-foot, two-ton creature was just a little boy in a huge body.

Rosanne forgot about the snake. She forgot Banner. She forgot the heavy club in her hand. She stared at the gigantic green creature with peaceful awe. But the boa's movement was not lost on the Hulk. He saw a slimy motion beyond the girl's foot and he moved slowly forward. Effortlessly, he picked the girl up and put her behind him, then watched the huge snake coil back into the tiny clearing, its evil head raised high.

The Hulk was fascinated by its rippling movements and the rhythm with which its head moved slowly back and forth. He was enjoying the first moment of peace he had experienced since coming into existence so many years ago. The area was warm and wet, a natural womb, and the young woman's energy and lack of fear added to his inner calm. The Hulk put out his huge paw, and the undulation of the snake stopped. Once again the Hulk smiled in innocent wonder. But then the boa bit his hand, and suddenly, without warning, the Hulk smashed the snake's head a foot and a half into the African dirt.

Rosanne didn't move as the giant screamed his displeasure, grabbed the snake's vibrating body, and began bashing it against a tree. She instinctively ducked, however, when the Hulk hurled the dead carcass far across the river. She was stunned that even after such a display of anger and strength, he turned to her with a sheepish grin, shaking his bitten hand like it had been accosted by a pesky fly.

"Let me see," she said, holding out her two hands.

The Hulk looked at his hand, then over at the two of hers. He grunted, as if saying, "It's nothing." Then he looked out over the river, turned back, and nodded, silently expressing his opinion that the snake wouldn't bother them anymore.

"Please," said Rosanne quietly, "I'd like to see your hand." She motioned again with her own. The huge green man approached shyly and brought his hand up to the two of hers.

It was at least two and a half times the size of a large human hand, and it was heavily lined. A palm reader could have had a field day on the grooves and canals covering almost every inch of the surface. Even after the snake's attack, there was no evidence of a wound. To top it off, the muscular, textured skin was soft to the touch: a baby's skin, but immeasurably stronger, and stretched across a body which would make an Adonis blush.

Rosanne looked up to see the brutal green face studying her as

intently as she was examining him. Slowly, and with purpose, he turned his hand over and took one of hers in a gentle, but firm, grasp. She stared at his face and somehow knew that, as impossible as it seemed, this creature was Bruce Green. It had to be. He wore the doctor's pants and even held a passing resemblance to him in his own livid way. It was the only way to explain Bruce's mysterious utterances and theories, and his attitude, which could be kindly described as "friendly reticence."

The Wittenborn girl had sensed Bruce's reluctance to make any clear-cut decision, or attempt any action, and now she knew why. Once he pulled the trigger on his hidden reserves, his "inner strength" would blow everything all out of proportion.

The Hulk let go of her hand and began touching her head. She let his iron beam of a finger trace her nose, her eyelids, her mouth, and her neck. The creature gaped in surprise at every new human discovery. Rosanne smiled, honestly liking this Hulk, but knowing also that her life was in his hands. One wrong move and he would lash out like a hurt child. One wrong move and he would leave her there to suffer certain death. One wrong move and both she and Bruce would never see civilization again. She felt the Hulk's hand drop from her body. She glanced at his face and saw that the creature was fighting to stay awake. The lack of an adversary was sapping his energy.

"Bruce!" she cried, gripping his arms. "Bruce, can you run?"

The sleepy eyes met hers in confusion.

"Run!" she repeated. "Like this." She moved back a step, and ran in place.

His face immediately brightened and he mimicked her action, shaking the jungle for hundreds of yards around. Rosanne herself was knocked down by the vibrations. The Hulk immediately stopped moving and grunted inquiringly.

"I'm all right," she replied quickly, making sure she smiled.

She found her footing and approached him once more. "Could you carry me, please?" He looked at her, seemingly trying to make pictures out of her words but failing at it. "Carry me," she repeated, taking his arms and moving them around her.

Remembering the banana boat, the Hulk grunted in sudden discovery and lifted her up. Rosanne moved up him and settled comfortably in his arms.

"All right," she said. "Now, run. Run!"

The Hulk smiled wide and, like before, ran in place. It took Rosanne almost half a minute to be heard above the violently rustling underbrush.

“No, no, no,” she called, tapping his chest with her open hand. “Run. Escape. You know, run!” The beast stopped leaping about and watched the angel in his arms gesticulating wildly. What was she trying to tell him? He saw one of her arms point one way. He looked in that direction and saw only dense foliage. No snake there. Nothing there. What could she want?

The Hulk wanted to understand, but he was too tired to really try. He had smashed the snake, but now he was just standing there. Whenever he stopped fighting he got tired and went back to sleep. When he was awake, he fought. Now his eyes began to close.

“No, Bruce, please!” Rosanne shouted, slapping his upper torso with all her might. He didn’t feel it. When he didn’t fight, he was asleep. His eyes closed.

Rosanne stopped yelling and the green-silver eyes sprang open again as the air was filled with the sound of buzzing. Without thinking, the Hulk charged toward the spot the girl had initially pointed at. He moved his shoulder down to protect his angel, then pounded through the underbrush without even looking for the source of the sawing sound. He had to get his angel to a safe spot; only then could he face the new threat. Rosanne marveled at his immediate reaction to the sound.

Neither of them had seen anything, but his response had been instantaneous. How did he know that the sound represented a danger to them? What Rosanne didn’t know was that, to the Hulk, almost anything was a threat.

The Greek pulled at the right epaulet on his shirt. The entire garment had stuck to his torso hours ago from the humidity, and this constricted his arm movements. With the amount of machinery stuck in the cockpit of the jet copter, free movement was essential.

He shrugged the shirt into a semblance of comfort and leaned back against the steaming-hot seat. He adjusted his headphone, then pulled up the small attached microphone.

“Anything?” he asked, looking over at the black-garbed pilot.

The pilot shook his head. The Greek cursed fluently in his native language. If he didn’t hit paydirt on this particular effort, his reputation would be severely soiled. Face meant everything at the General’s mansion, but, unfortunately, the rules kept changing. The despot’s whims could turn three hundred sixty degrees, depending on such variables as the weather, what he had for lunch, what he would have for dinner, or how clean his shoes were. One thing was certain, however—if the Greek didn’t find the Russian’s ship and the Wittenborn girl, the General would be terminally displeased. The

Greek tapped his microphone.

"JH 2, report," he called.

"JH 1, this is JH 2, nothing," came the message over his earphones.

"JH 3, report."

"JH 1, this is JH 3, nothing."

"JH 4, report."

"Uh . . . JH 1, this is JH 4," said an unnaturally breathless voice. "We've spotted something, but, uh, you'd better come over here yourself. It's . . . uh . . . a little hard to believe."

The pilot for Jet Helicopter 4 resisted reacting to the Greek's pointed questions concerning his sanity and drinking habits and simply gave JH 1's pilot his coordinates. The JH 1 pilot banked at a sickening degree and sped off in his companion's direction. The Greek, holding onto his stomach, recommended that the remaining two jet copters follow at a discreet distance.

The trio sped across the treetops, farther and farther away from the riverbed. The Greek continued to pull at his shirt, while pressing the JH 4 pilot for details.

"Do you see any of the crew?"

"No."

"The girl?"

"I think so."

"You *think* so?"

"Well . . . something's with her."

"Who?"

"Uh . . ."

"Speak up, man! What's happening?"

"I really think you should see this for yourself."

"Visual contact," the JH 1 pilot broke in.

"All right. All right, I'll take a look."

The trio of copters came upon their fellow hovering over a patch of avodire trees near a creek. JH 1 moved to its side and the Greek once again broached the Wittenborn subject.

"Look," replied the JH 4 pilot. "Look for yourself. I saw it going in. It should be coming back out any moment now."

The Greek looked over and down, trying to keep his view clear. He was planning to rake the JH 4 pilot over the coals again when one of the avodires fell down.

Actually, there was a loud crack and then the top half of one tree went spinning into the open, followed by a fist as big as a boulder.

“What was that?” shouted the Greek. “What was that?”

“I saw a missile,” cried JH 3’s pilot.

“A bazooka?” mused JH 2’s pilot.

“A catapult,” said JH 1’s pilot quietly, with assurance.

A second later, the missile, catapult, or bazooka blasted out of the patch of wood, more powerful than all three put together, and as green as the tree’s leaves.

“Wha’ the . . . ?” said the Greek with unusual lucidity.

The Hulk smashed across the landscape, holding the girl against his chest like a pet cat, while swinging his right fist as if battling the air. The buzzing metal birds enraged him. He had faced such enemies before and they didn’t play fair. They moved down slowly and dropped pain on him, then moved away before he could fight back. But he had a chance this time, because he was smart. He knew something they didn’t know he knew. They didn’t know he had faced their kind before. He was ready for them. They wanted his angel. Let them come and get her. His fist raised in defiance and he roared at them.

“Is that beast familiar in these surroundings?” asked the Greek in amazement. “Is this that thing’s natural habitat? I mean, I’ve never even seen a picture of anything like that!”

“It’s not an ape . . . exactly . . .” said JH 2’s pilot.

“Hey, if there are pygmies around here,” said JH 3’s pilot, “couldn’t this be a sort of opposite tribe? You know, giants as opposed to midgets?”

“Green?” asked JH 4’s pilot incredulously. “Green? Come on!”

Unfortunately for the Greek, not one of the pilots was African. “To hell with definitions!” he screamed into his mike. “This is a reconnaissance, not a wildlife seminar! JH 4, did you see any other members of the crew?”

“No, just the girl and that . . . thing.”

“All right, then let’s move in and get them,” the Greek commanded.

The four aircraft banked in unison and moved after the rampaging Hulk. While they caught up, the Greek called back to the General’s headquarters.

“We’ve located the girl,” he reported.

“Fabulous!” came a voice that nearly blew his eardrums into the center of his head. “Do you have her?”

“Located, I said,” the Greek responded, irritated. “But we’ll have her as soon as we figure out how to handle her, uh, shall we say, companion.”

"What do you mean?" boomed the deep, jolly voice.

The Greek explained, waiting for the inevitable explosion, but, uncommonly, the response was full-throated merriment. "But that is my friend," said the General. "It is the Hulk. Oh, my, my, my. The last Russian report mentioned an extra guest, but I little imagined . . ."

"But, but, but," the Greek sputtered. "It's ten feet tall! It's green!"

"And I am a different color, too, am I not?" the General raged. "The Hulk and I understand each other. Bring them both in."

"But . . ."

"Both, I say." The General signed off by disconnecting his microphone.

"May your olive oil always have pits!" the Greek shouted into the dead mike. "May your ocean dives always meet with rocks! May your cheese always be Limburger!"

"What is it?" inquired the pilot.

"Both," said the Greek, watching as the four super-powered whirlybirds circled the green beast. If anybody could bring this monster to his knees, it was these babies. "The General wants both of them alive."

"What are we going to do?" the pilot retorted. "Drop a copter on his head?"

"If we have to. But I think somewhere among all this gadgetry we can figure out a better way."

The Hulk ran along indefatigably. He was waiting for the metal birds to come lower. And he could wait for a long, long time. The dynamo charged thighs rocked to and fro; the slab-like soles pressed everything in their paths. The free right arm swung independently from his racing momentum, and the jungle shook in rhythm with his lumbering flight. Rosanne held on with her teeth clamped as the sights moved by in a steady stream. The small rivers and brooks the Hulk couldn't ford by foot, he leaped across. Wild animals for miles around returned to their homes in deference to a superior creature. The Hulk was loose!

He ran and kept on running until he came to what he had been hoping for with his simple cunning. The Hulk slowed and then stopped before a gigantic hill of rock. The stone tower rose above the jungle like an arm of the earth. This was a perfect stage on which to enact his battle! He gently lowered Rosanne between two closely wedged stone slabs, creating a makeshift teepee. With one open palm, he made it clear that she was to stay exactly where she was. He pushed his palm forward still farther. *Exactly* where she was, no matter what happened. Once he was sure of her understanding, he

began to climb the rock mountain.

"Bruce, be careful," she called after him.

"There he is!" shouted JH 2's pilot.

The green monstrosity appeared above the lip of the trees, laboriously mounting the stone hill.

"Ah, so he wants a fight, does he?" the Greek said. "A pistachio's last stand, eh? All right, Mr. Hulk, but remember, you asked for it." The Greek giggled at the sight of this lime satire of a muscleman. "I knew my tenure with the General was going to be different, but . . ."

He let the sentence drift off as the jet copters moved in.

The Hulk had reached the mountain's peak and was snorting like a maddened bull as the metal birds whirled around his perch like persistent wasps. The Greek, in the meantime, gave last-minute instructions concerning the plan they had formulated while on the monster's trail.

"JH 2 and 3, all darts loaded and ready?"

"Ready."

"Move in."

Two of the copters tightened their patterns until they were swinging back and forth like pendulums in front of the Hulk. Then, in rhythm, the two began to spit long silver darts dipped in a paralytic agent. The speeding projectiles looked like diamond beams in the equatorial sun as they smashed around the beast's feet. Stone exploded out like buckshot and the darts ricocheted in a "W" pattern as the jet copters swung by each other. Even as one fired, the other was correcting its aim.

On the next bypass, both pilots were dead on target. The metal arrows flew down on the Hulk with the precision of laser beams. The beast leaned down and let the speeding projectiles bounce off his shoulders and neck like an especially refreshing shower. His cry was one of repellent humor—a hyena's laugh. The pilots continued to pour it on, but the Hulk's only response was one of derision. The second time he punched most of the attack away with flailing arms, but the third pass he allowed to catch him full in the chest—to no effect.

The two jet copters retreated as the Hulk waved and shouted.

"All right JH 4, you set?" asked the Greek, rolling up his sleeves.

"All set."

On cue, the two remaining copters swung into their attack patterns. They came in on an "X" pattern over the summit where the green giant was perched. On their screaming approach, Rosanne peeked fearfully out from behind her makeshift shelter. In a second the attack was over. Two bombs sped out from the bottoms of the metal birds

and met at the Hulk's feet as the machines' paths crossed behind the mountain.

There was a flash, a hollow-sounding explosion, and two huge clouds of thick smoke covered the hilltop like a hunk of cotton candy on a cardboard stick. The smoke reached ever outward, creating ever new formations, but it lost none of its concentration. Just when it seemed about to dissipate at the outer edges, it fell in on itself again, making a more compact, but just as powerful, gas bomb. Rosanne watched in horror as the cloud continued to wrap itself around the peak. The pilots and the Greek held their breath as the smoke billowed and turned.

Then a small shower of rocks dropped out of the bottom of the smoke, followed by the falling form of the Hulk. Rosanne screamed as the body dropped like a dead weight, smashing brutally against an outcropping, rolling with ever-increasing speed, spinning with a bone-shattering crack against a boulder, and then dropping at least twenty feet into a crevice.

"Got him!" the Greek cheered. "JH 2 and 3 land and retrieve the girl. Then we'll set up some kind of netting for whatever's left of our green friend."

The two choppers dropped easily into a clearing just beyond the miniature mountain, their pilots only too eager to comply with the Greek's orders, now that the monster was vanquished. They landed side by side and the two air jockeys hopped out. As they trotted off to the base of the mound, a boulder the size of an automobile rose out of the crevice. It flew gracefully through the air, and it collided with jet copter number 2 with a crash that was heard jungle-wide. The metal bird crumbled and slid, sprinkling shards and sparks in a triangular trail as it went.

Just as the rock rolled off it, the chopper began to topple over onto its twin. JH 3's pilot began to run toward his plane, but he thought better of it after the two machines met in a dying embrace. The roto blades split first, bending and cracking, and then the body metal cracked open like fresh eggshells.

"Holy mother of God!" the Greek screamed before the dust had even risen. He held his breath. "Pull back! JH 4, pull back!"

But it was too late. A massive green body bounded up out of the crevice with its eyes bright and its lips pulled back in an evil grin. Its forehead was bunched in an effort to concentrate its monumental power down into its legs. The fourth jet copter began to move away, but it was a second too slow.

The green knees bent, the arms made right angles, and the face was turned toward the sky. Then the fists swung up, the mouth opened to

scream, and the legs straightened out. As if in slow motion, the Incredible Hulk rose. The copter seemed to turn to meet him, and in midair the broad hands slapped across its landing gear. The entire craft tilted sickeningly to the right and began to lose altitude.

"Jet thrust!" instructed the Greek in panic, knowing it to be the only way the ship could remain airborne. "Turn on the power!"

The pilot of JH 4 pushed on the air power and the chopper twisted like a caught fish. The Hulk held on. The copter bucked like a wild pony. The Hulk held on. It spun like an insane merry-go-round. The Hulk held on.

"Pull up!" commanded the Greek, hovering above in his own craft. "He's got to let go when the air gets thin."

JH 4's pilot added additional thrust. The copter remained stationary. He turned it up a bit more, but like a truck stuck in the mud, the craft shook and settled back. The engines whined like banshees, but JH 4 didn't move.

"He's holding me down!" the pilot cried out in fear. "I can't get any altitude!"

"That's impossible!" the Greek called back. "Take it easy. Just try it again."

The pilot pulled back on his jets and then applied pressure again. The ship shook, but it began to move.

"It's coming!" he shouted with relief. "It's working now." He added more thrust.

"All right. Good," said the Greek. "Move straight up until the giant suffocates."

JH 4 moved across the sky on the diagonal.

"Straight! Straight!" repeated the Greek. "Move straight up!"

"I'm trying," spat the pilot, fear gripping his bones again.

The Hulk's muscles were twisted into eccentric sculptures across his arms and chest. Sweat poured in rivulets across his torso and down his face. As the copter moved, he moved, seemingly doing chin-ups and body presses on the landing gear. The metal securing the rods and swells to the main body of the craft began to moan softly as the Hulk's hands were turning the steel into clay.

The chopper continued to struggle upward, but on a diagonal.

"Don't panic," the Greek said, trying to remain calm himself. "Just keep coming slowly. You'll make it. We'll guide you up."

The pilot of JH 4 pushed the jet thrust all the way up. The joystick was vibrating in his hand as if possessed by an evil spirit. The copter continued to move laboriously upward, with the green beast securely in tow.

Then the landing gear broke off.

The ship reacted like an arrow loosed from a bow. Still on a diagonal, it shot into the sky with nearly supersonic speed. The Greek had time to scream, but JH 1's pilot did not have time to get out of the way. The two ships met in a dazzling display of pyrotechnics. Their whirling blades sliced across each other's bodies a split second before the head of one slammed into the side of the other. The resulting crash made the previous collision sound like a paper bag popping open.

And this time, the two planes' jets were on and the motors were engaged. The friction sparks had running fuel to ignite—which they did, with a vengeance. The midday sun was put to shame by the fireball that engulfed the remains of JH 1 and JH 4. Pieces of the copters were spread from one end of the forest to the other in a perfect circle. The rotted, flaming husks seemed to stall, motionless in the air, for a moment; then they dropped to the ground like shot ducks. The base of the mountain looked like a junk yard on fire.

Rosanne Wittenborn reluctantly left the cover of her stone hut, which had been liberally showered with metal hail. She walked like a zombie to the edge of the four wrecks, and she stood there for a moment.

"Bruce?" she called weakly. "Bruce?"

Smoke curled around one pair of twisted remains, then parted as a huge green man walked slowly out holding a set of landing gear.

Rosanne fell to her knees in hysterical relief, laughing and crying at the same time.

"Bruce . . . oh, Bruce, thank God!"

The beast drew near her and, with a last, confused glance, threw away the heavy set of wheels and rods. He looked down at his tearful angel, who was calling a name he didn't know.

"Hulk," he told her, pointing to himself. "Hulk." Then he laid down at her feet and went to sleep.

Seven

The general was not in a good mood. It was evident not so much from his manner, which would pull Henry VIII up short, or his expression, which was just this side of psychotic, but rather from the fact that he wasn't breathing. Whenever his cheeks puffed out, his color got purplish, and his head literally vibrated, his closest advisors stayed as far away as possible. They knew he was avoiding thinking about a problem.

And when the General spent his time avoiding a problem, one could be sure the General would be feeling positively foul. At the moment he was stalking through his impeccably outfitted mansion, playing with the veins in his neck, which bulged when he held his breath. He strode through the beautifully designed hallways lined with rare Dutch paintings; he stamped along under the detailed stained-glass skylights; he trudged up the wide marble stairs. Finally, he moved down a dark blue carpeted hallway to two huge white doors outfitted with large gold doorknobs.

The doors were never latched, and the General simply jarred them open with his shoulder. Inside was a room as large as half a football field. At the twenty-five-yard line, two stairways rose to two balconies which overlooked his kingdom on one side and the jungle on the other. At about the thirty-five-yard line was a huge round table made from the trunk of a tree. Seated around it were uniformed men of almost every nationality, each heavily decorated. And in one corner of

the room was a completely self-enclosed laboratory.

Its walls and ceiling were made of clear but extremely powerful plexiglass. Inside were machines that no one around the table could understand. There was a trio of padded chairs outfitted with leather straps on the ends of small cranes. There were rows of what looked like X-ray machines. There were several items that defied description. They would be vaguely familiar to anyone who had ever visited a doctor's, optometrist's, or dentist's office, but the warning labels in eight languages bore witness to the fact that they were anything but beneficial.

Seated quietly in the midst of all the equipment was a crestfallen black man in a tweed suit and sweater vest, perspiring on the plexiglass floor without complaint. The clear box was essentially a prison and the dapper man was the prisoner. The man was Dr. Maxwell Wittenborn.

As he entered the room, the General released his breath and strode across the room like a cocky elephant. His three hundred sixty-five pounds swung back and forth as he bore down on the scene. His tiny features perked up as soon as he saw the captive doctor. He directed his body toward one shiny wall, stopped in Wittenborn's eye line, and pounded the plastic.

"We've got her," he merrily called in the voice which had been described as a meta-decibel tuba. At the sound of his words, the man within the walls buried his face in his hands. The General spun around and laughed. The heavily curtained walls caught his booming outbursts and buried it in their folds.

The General executed a surprisingly graceful pirouette and headed for the top of the table. "Gentlemen," he said, "I have singlehandedly created the finest set of international contacts the world will ever know. When the U.N. did not allow me to join their group of pompous, pretentious, egocentric hedonists, I did not pout. I did not play the lout. I faked them out!" As he spoke, the General moved back and forth along the lengths of a wall hanging, which pictured him as a bloody Roman emperor. Then he stabbed his finger into the air like a television evangelist. "I made my own! And that, like I said, is you."

"My secret army is the best that money can buy. The German was a man who never got over the Reich. The Russian was the saltiest seadog I've ever seen. The Greek was profane but the sharpest pilot ever to come out of Vietnam. And all of them have been stymied by a twenty-year-old girl!"

The General spat the final word like he was mentioning a multi-legged, greasy insect. He turned then to the black man in the plastic booth. "But I will show her, I will know her, I shall mow her down!"

he shouted, moving like a boxer on the verge of retirement. “What I will do to that filly—you won’t recognize her, Wittenborn!”

He turned back to his assembled crew. “She will be here soon. I will not have it any other way. You shall see to it. I will no longer hold you back. You, the Oriental; you, the Englishman; you, the Spaniard; you, my fellow countrymen, put your own plans into effect. She is close by. The final Greek report substantiated that. She will be here by tonight. See to it.”

The men seated around the table moved back and got up. The General walked over to the clear box where the old doctor stood on the last legs of his hope. His expression mimicked defiance, but the cracks in its foundation were showing.

“Soon, Wittenborn, soon,” the General sneered, “I will get what I want from you. I will know the secret of the gamma treatment. I will see to it that you have no choice but to tell me.” He moved his hands in a crude outline of the female form. Then twisted the image into a pulp by curling his fingers into fists and smacking them together. The General was feeling better. The servants heard his laughter throughout the mansion.

The sun. The heat. The mud. The rocks. The forest. The guilt. The guilt—the guilt was like a weight crushing his head. It was a steam press, pushing down and down until his brow felt starched. Bruce Banner awoke ashamed from his living purgatory. He did not know why, but he felt depressed to the point of committing suicide.

His eyes opened. He saw treetops with the sun winking behind their swaying branches. He heard the leaves rustle, the far cry of wild animals, and what sounded like paper being crumpled. He felt a hard, pulpy thing on the back of his neck and a yielding bed of dirt underneath. Nothing was new. He had been gone and now he was back. The only thing left to wonder about was when he would be going again.

“Bruce?” said a hesitant, gentle voice, the lush voice of an understanding woman. Banner did not recognize it.

“Yes?” he replied to the sky.

“Are you all right?”

Words came back to him. It would be all right, he had promised. He had said it twice. And then . . . and then . . . the nightmare descended again. Banner rose to his elbows. He looked at Rosanne. She was different, somehow. Her clothes had not changed. They looked comfortable, the way they did after you had gone through a lot with them. How long had it been? A day? Two? And her face was no worse for wear. There were no bruises or cuts that he could see.

Banner realized then what had changed about her. Her expression was different. Initially, she had looked at him like a woman willing to become a lovesick girl. She had wanted to depend on him, and her face had held anticipation, affection, and hope. She had been asking him not to fail her. But he had, purposely, because no one could depend on him. He was, by nature of his very schizophrenic being, incapable of being trustworthy. Whenever he felt strongly enough about anything, a green thing handled the mechanics.

Now Rosanne's expression told him other things. She knew; she sympathized; but she . . . she . . . didn't like him. No, not like. Friendship had nothing to do with it. She didn't know him. And she didn't trust him.

"Yes, I'm all right," he finally said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." She looked at the ground like a child whose secret stash of dirty books had been discovered. She knew something he didn't know, and she didn't want to shame him—or pity him.

Banner was filled with a sudden self-loathing. He could no longer blame the Hulk for everything. He had accepted the monster as part of himself—as part of everyone. But he still felt angry at the fate that had exiled him to this horrible half-life. Hurriedly, he rose and stepped away, then stared uncomprehendingly over at the remains of the four jet copters. More had happened than he had imagined.

"Okay," he said as briskly as he could. "What went on?"

Rosanne's head rose, and the impersonal expression was still on her face.

"You honestly don't know?"

Banner spun around. "Let me give you the facts of my life," he said with more relief than passion. "My name is really Dr. Bruce Banner. I wasn't always the way I am now. But my emotions once got the better of my knowledge."

The girl opened her mouth to speak, but the doctor quickly held up his hand. "That is all I'm going to say about it. I never want something like this to happen to anybody else—ever. I think I'd die before I'd talk about how this happened to me. But, then, again," he added bitterly, "I'm not even sure I can die. Maybe even in that split second before the end, he'd come roaring up and fight forever."

"He?" she interjected.

"He, me—what difference does it make?"

"Maybe a lot, Bruce." Rosanne rose and stood before him. "He is a part of you, however it happened, and a part of you must be able to control him."

"How? How?" Banner yelled at her, then quickly calmed himself

down. “I’m certainly not aware of it,” he continued, weakly grinning. “You think I secretly like fighting, destruction, killing?”

“He doesn’t want to fight or destroy, and he certainly doesn’t want to kill. He protected me, Bruce. He saved your life.”

“Well, be sure to thank him for me when you see him again!”

Rosanne slapped him across the face.

Bruce’s expression rapidly changed from shock to awe to tired rationality.

“You sure like to take chances, lady,” he said.

Now it was the girl’s turn to grin. “I really don’t think you two are that much different. I think you’d do what he does if you could. And I think he’s trying to do what you would if he could only fully understand. He’s just . . . childlike, full of a curiosity and vitality.”

“Vitality? Ha! Power, ma’am, raw and unadulterated. And the name’s the Hulk—the Incredible, Unbelievable, Unwanted, Unenviable Hulk.”

“Hulk?” she mused, remembering the beast’s only utterance. “Yes. Yes, the Hulk. That’s what he said.”

Banner’s body suddenly snapped completely erect. His eyes grew wide and he gripped her shoulders.

“He talked?” he said incredulously. “He actually said something? Rosanne, quickly, you must tell me absolutely everything that happened—every detail, now!”

More information. More facts fitted away in the special section of his memory tagged with the green label. He had conversed. He had shown an interest in discovery. He had displayed a rudimentary cunning based on previous experience. And he did not purposely kill. He just didn’t know his own strength. The snake had attacked first. Two pilots had run into the jungle before the boulder had dropped on their copters. He would never know whether he had meant the other two to crash. He could understand it if he had but he hoped he hadn’t.

“I could be,” Banner said, sitting crosslegged on the ground opposite Rosanne. “It could be that essentially the Hulk is a child—I mean, legitimately and actually. You said his skin was smooth?”

The girl nodded, fascinated.

“Well, that could mean he’s capable of . . . of . . . growing up.” Banner was stunned at the very thought of it for a moment. “A freak of nature. Capable of being nurtured by the sun’s rays, like a plant, but, then, again, not like a plant at all. Even if he only came out at night once a month, maybe my body holds the vitamin D in abeyance for him. And maybe, just maybe, he can mature.” Bruce locked his eyes with hers.

“Think of it!” he cried. “Two connected, but separate, rational personalities: one for thought, one for action. My consciousness could store strategies: his could implement them. It could be happening in a small way now.”

“It *has* to be,” Rosanne stressed. “He comes from you, in all concepts of the word. Something moves him. And both your heads are too small to hold two brains.”

Her words suddenly swept Banner down another stream of thought, “Yes, but what *does* happen inside? Even I know how I change externally, but what happens to my organs, my muscles, my bones? That’s the key. The heart and brain: How do they change? And into what? Does it strengthen or weaken me, the Banner body. Is there any way I can keep the Hulk awake after fighting? Can I maintain the activity without the violence?” As quickly as he began his tirade, Banner fell back, defeated.

“Oh, damn. How can I ever know?” he wailed. “How can I ever know?”

“Bruce,” Rosanne said, holding his shoulders, “I . . . feel for the Hulk. He saved my life. *You* saved my life, several times. I feel for both . . . I mean, *all* of you. I can help. I will help, if you’ll let me.”

Banner looked her straight in the eye, both reluctant and desperate. “I want help, Rosanne. I need help. But I can’t accept it. Don’t you understand? I can never know him. I am the Hulk, but I will never know what it’s like to be him. All I know is that everytime he lives, I die—not figuratively, literally. I die. I can’t ask anyone to share that Curse.”

Rosanne Wittenborn leaned back, placing her hands behind her, and she stretched her legs out. Her pose was enticing and maternal at the same time.

“You don’t have to ask,” she said. “You don’t have a choice. You won’t be able to get rid of me. You can beg, you can cry, you can even threaten. But I won’t go. And you won’t get angry at me because you can’t afford to.”

Banner held back his immediate reply. Answers like “It won’t work” or “It’s too risky” were choked off. He could no longer make the decision himself. Here was someone special. Most people, had they known about him, would have fled. Many others would offer help but be incapable of giving it. Rosanne, however, was ready and able to try.

But they were both many miles from home. Their sympathy for one another might work out here, in an African jungle, where their lives were at stake, but what would happen in the cold light of civilization? Banner drained his head of all such thoughts. She had made her

decision and she was right. He was in no position to dispute it.

“Thank you,” was all he said.

She came into his arms as naturally as a salmon swimming upstream. He didn’t have to read her mind. She saw him as both cripple and giant, as a pitiful child and a masterful king, brilliant and naïve at the same time.

She loved him as a woman, as a girl, as a friend, as a partner, as a mother, as a lover. And God help him, something inside him loved her, also.

Eight

"Africa," said Agent Garris, "11,673,000 square miles. North to south, that's 5,000 miles. East to west, 4,700 miles. Chief mountain ranges: the Ahaggar, Atlas, Drakensberg, Ruwenzorki . . ."

"That's Ruwenzori," corrected Agent Curtiss, yawning elaborately.

"Thanks," said Agent Garris, wiping off his broad forehead for the fifth time. "Ruwenzori and the Tibesti. Chief rivers: Congo, Limpopo, Niger, Nile, Orange, and Zambezi. Largest deserts: Kalahari Namib, and, of course, the Sahara. Lots of movies shot there. Hey, did you see *Death on the Nile?"*

"Naw," said Curtiss. "I liked Albert Finney too much as Poirot."

"Yeah, yeah, well."

The two sat side by side in a Jeep that bounced across the Central African Republic. Curtiss was nearing the last leg of his journey, so he was going through his final briefing and armament fitting. He didn't know which he dreaded most, but when Garris resumed his droning, he was pretty sure it was the briefing.

"Let's see, now. This is the second largest continent in the world."

"What's the first?" Curtiss asked, knowing full well it was Eurasia.

Garris lost his place in the memorized speech. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Nothing. Just wanted to know is all."

"Well, you would do better to keep your mind on the mission at hand," Garris said hotly. "Now, what was I talking about? Oh, yes, the different life-styles. There's the farm life, the desert life, the tribal life,

and the city life. The chief products come from agriculture: bananas, cotton, peanuts—that sort of thing. Uh, mining produces the likes of diamonds, gold, uranium, lead—all that stuff. And manufacturing basically lies around cement, chemicals, and textiles."

"Fascinating," commented Curtiss dryly.

"It might do you good to know this," replied Curtiss in a huff.

"Mitch," said Curtiss in exasperation, "I do know this stuff. I also know Africa's chief lakes, biggest waterfalls, its highest and lowest elevations, its history, its heritage, every country, every nationality, and I'm fluent in Niger-Congo and Afro-Asiatic languages, while having a fine grasp of the Macro-Sudanic and Click tongues. You want to talk about the weather in Swahili?"

"There's no need to get abusive," Garris retorted quietly. "There's nothing wrong with a little repetition."

The two were nearing their destination, so Curtiss decided not to carry his half of the conversation to its natural conclusion. The Jeep wound its way through the narrow but straight streets, moving by one- and two-story dwellings that looked like giant warts with doors and windows. Drawing up beside one such edifice, Curtiss braked the vehicle, switched the key, and hopped out. Without turning to see if Garris followed, he strode in through the door.

A remarkably cool looking little man, wearing nothing more than khaki shorts, greeted him affably.

"Ah, Mr. Curtiss?" He did not wait for an answer. "Please go through that door." He pointed to a partition behind a black counter. Curtiss noticed it had a doorknob, but no keyhole or doorjambs. As he approached, it swung open automatically, exposing a bright white room about the size of an elevator. He turned back to see the little man and Garris standing together watching him.

"Thanks," he said. The little man smiled and waved. Garris looked vacuous and mopped his brow.

The door closed behind him smoothly as he moved into the room. As soon as it had shut soundly, the room turned a shade of deep red, and a disembodied feminine voice asked him to take off his clothes. He did so immediately and without question. The female voice thanked him and explained that he was about to take a sterility bath. As she spoke a slab started growing out of the wall. The voice recommended he lay down. He did. Then, with humor, the voice suggested that he wave his body hair good-bye.

The bath began. Two minutes later the opposite wall opened by sliding downward. On the other side was a fully outfitted laboratory staffed by seven scientists—two female, five male. Curtiss wondered, as he stood there naked, which one of the women had given him the

instructions. One man, his dark skin setting off his bright white lab coat, stood several yards in front of him with his hands in his pockets.

"Hello, Mr. Curtiss. Would you please step this way?" The man turned and led the agent over to a leather-covered examining table. "Please," said the pleasant fellow, "lie down." As Curtiss did so, the area flew into activity. Equipment was switched on, he was secured to the table by two wide straps, and a large operating light was pulled into position above him.

"I'm Dr. Merrick," said the black man, whose face was being covered with a surgical mask while his hands were encased in rubber gloves by the two female scientists. One of them, an attractive brunette, wheeled over a bureau full of sharp scalpels. Then she began to wash her hands. "Dr. Porter will assist me," Merrick explained, motioning to the scrubbing woman. She finished washing and two men helped her put her gloves on.

"You'd probably like to know that our work will not be permanent. We will simply follow the instructions from your Washington superiors. I am also told that you are familiar with the weapons we will be installing."

Curtiss nodded.

"Good," said Merrick. "Let's begin. Anesthesia."

Garris's face was no longer vacuous. The irritating man who'd insisted on giving Curtiss such a thorough briefing had revealed himself to be, in actuality, an expert in armaments and scientific advances. And he didn't have all those letters behind his name for nothing.

Now Curtiss sat in Garris's plainly decorated office, which was lined with books and heat-resistant microfilm cassettes, and Garris sat behind his worn oak desk. Curtiss was dressed in a loose white cotton shirt and faded jeans. Garris wore a lab coat and white gloves—a terry-cloth headband held his straight, sandy hair back from his brow. A piece of tracing paper lay on the desk, and on its surface were a number of very tiny instruments.

"Besides your ample physical and self-defensive abilities," he was saying, "you have four pieces of equipment to call on. First, under your left forefinger fingernail." Garris caught a flesh-colored sliver of plastic in between his tweezers and held it up to Curtiss's eyes. "All you have to do is depress the fingernail in spurts of two or three times, and it will be ready. Press the edge of the nail against a neck, and enough poison will be pumped into the body to rupture every organ. But you must discharge it once it's set, or else you'll probably wind up killing yourself over an itch or mosquito bite.

“Next, in a sack behind your right ear is this tiny ball of highly corrosive acid.” Garris lifted another speck from his desk. It looked like a very small circle of rubber cement. “You can pull open the sack fairly easily, but once air contacts the ball, you have seven seconds to get rid of it. Any skin it touches after that will corrode rapidly. On the chest, it’ll probably cause a heart attack. On the leg, you’ll soon have a cripple. If someone swallows it . . . well, forget him.

“Third, believe it or not, up your nose.”

Curtiss smirked despite himself.

“What are you going to do?” Garris said. “An orifice is an orifice. Anyway, up your nose is a coil that can be stretched to a length of a foot. Pull it taut once, then drop it on someone, and enough current will be discharged to electrocute or coronate—that is, give the victim a coronary. It’s up your left nostril. Try not to pick it with your left forefinger. You’d be taking your life in your hands.

“Finally, between your right toes. Tiny pinpricks in between two layers of skin. When you walk or run, it’s all right. But in a karate kick, poison will be channeled into your victim. Classic stuff, all made for easy access and somewhat innocent deployment. If you work it right, no one will know you’re the killer.

“Then, of course, you can call on various obvious weaponry, depending on your situation. If a gun is nearby, and can do the job just as well, feel free.”

“Now, what exactly are my prerogatives here?” Curtiss asked.

“The whole point is to keep Wittenborn from giving the General more power, or to keep the General from getting it. The bottom line is that Dr. Wittenborn cannot remain in Africa, because even if the General were killed, his underlings are power-mad enough to keep pressuring the doctor. If you can’t get the doctor out, get his kids out. If you can’t get his kids out, then kill the General. That should at least give us enough time to try to rectify the problem another way.

“And if you can’t do any of that, well, you might just have to handle Wittenborn or the children.”

“Agh!” Curtiss exclaimed in distaste. “That’s just not my style.”

“What choice do we have?” Garris said helplessly. “It would be a lot easier if you were female. The General’s white-slavers are always on the lookout for the unattached woman wandering around. As it is, we will have to get you captured as a slave. Your new masters will move you into the General’s kingdom and probably lock you up. Then it’s up to you. Matthews, of course, will be waiting for your signal.”

“Yeah.” Curtiss grimaced. “When all four weapons are discharged, my other toe will send an S.O.S. Right?”

"Then, and only then."

Curtiss remembered his partner piloting their prototype over the sub and his comment when they had destroyed the attacking jet. "Yeah, man," he breathed, "better living through science."

It was hot, it was wet, and the foliage was thick. But Rosanne was happy and Banner was more comfortable than he had been in some time. The unfamiliarity helped. Nothing was recognizable within his frame of reference. And since the snake and the copters had been dispatched, they had neither seen nor heard anything threatening.

Then, again, they really hadn't traveled very far. The lack of shoes was the main reason. Their pampered feet was another. They were simply not used to walking barefoot through anything, let alone a strange jungle. So they trod carefully, helping each other with a soft intimacy. The environment was unreal, even exotic, and, in a humid way, idyllic. They felt like the last people in the world. But they were soon to feel otherwise.

The first arrow shot by Banner's head, slipped down, and disappeared in the underbrush. He thought it was the close passage of a mosquito at first, but then another rose into his vision and zipped over his head. As a third looped in front of him, he clearly saw the darkened tip, the straight shaft, and the feathers on its tail.

"Down!" he cried, pulling on Rosanne's arm and falling. Suddenly, their little patch of jungle was filled with tiny, nearly naked men, screaming at the top of their lungs and brandishing spears and bows.

"Twides," Rosanne gasped. That was the scientific word for pygmies.

As soon as the natives began leaping toward them, Banner struggled to his feet. He saw their small yellow-brown bodies dodge from tree to tree, some climbing, others moving straight in on them. The trees and plants shook, and, amazingly, Banner was more fascinated than frightened.

"Friends," he said, holding up his hands. "Friends."

Three little men dropped out of the trees on top of him. Three sharp stones were soon pressed against his neck and chest. Rosanne was thrown down next to him by four men at least a half a foot shorter than she was. Side by side, they were kicked, stoned, and poked. Finally, rough hands turned them over onto their stomachs and spears were placed in the small of their backs.

"Bruce?"

"Don't worry."

Stout branches were placed lengthwise on the backs of their necks,

and four men began to lash their wrists to opposite ends of these poles with thin twine. Then another stick was pushed through the openings their elbows made behind their backs. Within minutes, both found themselves bound helplessly in a most uncomfortable position. More hands were needed to bring them to their feet.

"Bruce," Rosanne repeated more stridently.

As Banner opened his mouth to reply, a cloth was stuffed in and another swath was tied around that. He saw Rosanne struggle; then one man held her nose while another stuffed a cloth into her mouth. Finally, twine was bound above and below their knees so they could walk, but not run.

A procession began, and Banner and Wittenborn were urged on by the points of arrows. Before and behind them was a squad of stone-faced pygmies. Soon they had emerged into a small clearing, encircled with simple huts. Seated in a large semicircle around the center of the clearing were dozens more jungle warriors holding small bows and solid spears. Before them were two upright posts to which Bruce and Rosanne were brought.

The staffs holding their arms were quickly and brutally broken and their bonds loosed, but only so they could be better secured to the wooden posts. Their numb hands were tied behind them and they were attached to the poles at the ankles, knees, waist, chest, and neck. Their imprisonment was handled as if it were a divine ritual. The audience did not move, and the captors worked with reverence and precision. The gags remained where they were. Rosanne looked over, her eyes pleading, but Banner's brow was curved with curiosity.

The circle rustled, then parted at one end. A line of male pygmies emerged, all equally lithe and powerful-looking. Their arms were long, their legs were short, and they were no taller than four feet, eight inches. Each of them was covered with animal fat and red war paint. The last in line wore a ceremonial mask. Banner's eyes widened with at least partial understanding.

Finally, the line of elders reached their places and all heads turned toward a hut on the apex of the nomadic village. From the opening a whitened shock of curly hair appeared. Under that came a head lined with age, pain, and wisdom. The tribal leader had emerged, and the ceremony had officially begun.

Suddenly the line of counselers rose and began to dance. Their feet moved in an unrecognizable rhythm, and their mouths opened and closed, but no words emerged. Hands shook and drums were in evidence, but no beat was heard and no music was played. The only sounds were those of weapons rattling and feet slapping the ground.

As if one cue, the rest of the male tribesmen rose and joined the

undulation. Banner spotted several children's heads appearing from behind the huts, but maternal hands pulled them back. The only garment any of the children wore was a soiled loincloth.

Charms in all shapes and sizes began to appear as the dance grew in size and intensity. Mouths silently asked the supreme being for guidance and assistance. No one paid any notice to the two captives, but it was obvious that they were the central point around which the rite revolved. A story began to form from the ritual movement: a tale of woe, of oppression, hate, and horrible death. The men's faces were twisted in tragedy and remembered pain.

Finally, the discordance gathered momentum and the dancers joined ranks. Each group moved back until a large space was cleared before the two captives. Heads turned, and as the steps became constricted, the mood became anticipatory. Then into the clearing came two men—men swathed in the uniforms of civilization, men with shirts, belts, pants, and shoes. Both fell before the posts motionless, as if hurled forward. They were the pilots of jet copters number 2 and 3.

The pygmies lined up—their arrows notched, their spears raised. Then they hurled their weapons in rapid succession. With speed and exacting aim, each tribesman settled his score with the pilots. When the festivities finally ended, the two prone men looked like stuffed pincushions.

Banner seemed confused, and Rosanne looked ready to faint. Then the tribal leader, his face cracked with lines of intelligence, came forward. He raised one hand and pointed a finger at them.

"You," he said in faultless English, "are the barbarians. Our dance may seem ferocious and brutal, but we cry to the supreme being to deliver us from the evil that takes our land, our dignity, and our very lives from us. The after-life is noble, but our deaths are not honorable. All of us have been touched by the beast, have felt the damnation of his touch. We do not die under the sword; we curl into ashes; we melt into puddles of our own blood. I have seen him and his machines. I have seen what they do to my people. Often we have prayed for an end as honorable as the one we have visited upon your fellows."

He motioned toward the shapes that used to be the pilots.

"I speak for you," he said then. "I must, since your own voices would call him down upon us. I beg the supreme being to forgive you. I beg for your salvation in the after-life. I do not wish you well, but I pray for your return to this plane in our bodies so you could suffer as we have. Farewell."

The leader put his arm out, and a spear was placed in his open palm. He held it like a treasure, then pulled it to his chest. His lips

moved; his eyes closed. He stood before Banner, his arm raised.

There was a tug at Bruce's subconscious. A small one.

The leader's eyes opened. Pity and revulsion filled them. Then his hand tightened about the shaft, and his arm went back.

Suddenly there was a flash from beyond him. A twig fell from a bush. Something whistled. There was a sound like a cantaloupe being split open. With a lurch, the leader swept forward, blood coursing from his back. Banner saw a bright metal star wink at him before the red liquid covered it completely.

There was a split second of total silence, and then the jungle shattered with a savage concussion. The tribe stared at Banner in hateful reverence as they scrambled toward the jungle. To them, the supreme being had struck their leader down in displeasure. But before they could escape, a worse fate was visited upon them.

Silver stars spun wickedly from the jungle in tearing spirals, ripping skin and muscle as they passed. Six murderously sharp points around a steel circle. They flew like Frisbees and sliced like knives. An even dozen came from beyond the trees, spilling blood as they went. After a moment, a high-pitched scream was heard and a gray garbed man, not much taller than the tribesmen, leaped into the clearing.

His hands, feet, and eyes were the only parts of him uncovered. Around his waist was a red sash, and tied to that was a long-handled, curved sword. His arms were held out, his palms open. As the pygmies began to charge him, his limbs swung in a flurry of movement. His actions were blurred, but the cracks of broken bones were unmistakable. A Japanese ninja had appeared in the middle of the African tropical forest.

The surviving pygmies fled from his onslaught in droves. But as they reached the other side of the clearing, more of the tribesmen dropped. Only the small wounds that appeared across their torsos gave a clue as to the cause of death. Banner managed to turn his head far enough to see black boots emerge from the surrounding foliage, with a pair of camouflage pants tucked into them. Then a man emerged, his silenced submachine gun still blazing. Atop his head was a jaunty beret, and he had a heavily waxed moustache. As out of place as the Samurai warrior, a highly decorated British commando came into view.

It was a legitimate slaughter. The two-man army calmly wiped out the pygmies. The ninja had his sword out and was quickly dispatching any of those who were merely wounded by his hands, feet, or stars. The commando had leaped back into the forest to track down any who may have crawled away.

Rosanne had finally fainted in shock. Banner felt weak with

repulsion. As his gaze returned to the ground before him, he saw the leader once again. The man's back still pumped blood, but his eyes were open. Banner met his gaze. The pygmies' eyes were filled with an inhuman loathing, a burning hatred that would never find an outlet this side of the grave. The small man died slowly, and Banner prayed for a quick end to the madness.

He received his wish. In a moment, he heard a call and two new men walked into the clearing. Both were dressed in bush outfits with six-guns in holsters at their hips. They chatted a moment among the strewn bodies around them, then moved forward to untie Banner and the girl.

Nine

The Oriental and the Britisher were laughing at their own private joke in the front of the van. Occasionally they'd turn and smirk at the gently disarranged costume of Wittenborn and the aghast expression of Banner. Rosanne had given up trying to arrange her torn skirt and top, and she simply lay there, her hands cuffed behind her back. Her lips were still sealed by a coarse cloth to prevent any of her outcries from disturbing other natives in the area, but the dark eyes above the gag spoke volumes. And whenever her gaze met Bruce's, she couldn't hide the bitter accusation in her eyes.

He had not changed. He had witnessed the most bloodthirsty travail in the entire mess, and it did not move him enough to change. They were again prisoners and he still did not change. He didn't even try to explain. Instead, he, too, sat on the metal floor of the van, handcuffed, and with makeshift shackles of rope around his legs.

Banner was attempting to sort out the whole adventure, with some degree of success. It was the most important time in his life since the Curse, at least as far as he could remember. He had discovered more about himself and the Hulk and how they worked together in these few days than he had been able to for years. But what good would it do him? That was the question. What good would it do?

The countryside bounced across the windows at a steady pace. The van must have been following some kind of path, since there were no

sudden detours or stops or shouted warnings. The Britisher kept the speedometer at a rock-steady thirty miles per hour, and the Oriental kept the chatter at a rock-steady two words per second.

The foliage had thinned somewhat, and was now interspersed with tall golden reeds that shone in the setting sun. It could be a sign that they were nearing civilization. The Oriental turned again, his face-mask off, revealing a pale yellow face and crew-cut black hair. He was smiling especially wide now. He had succeeded where the others had failed. He was bringing in the girl and her friend. He would be lying if he said he wasn't relieved. All the talk of a huge green man powerful enough to stop cars had gotten him a little tense.

But all there really had been was a thin white man in a devastated pair of blue slacks, a man unable to even loosen his bonds. How he and the girl had been able to get this far into the jungle was beyond him, especially since there wasn't a scratch on her lovely body. The face showed exhaustion, but there was no sign of exposure or starvation. The Oriental looked her up and down, then decided to join her in the back for the rest of the trip.

He rose out of his seat and maneuvered into the back of the van. As his foot found the metal floor, the side of the vehicle suddenly bent in and leaped an inch and a half into the air. The Oriental flew against the other side and the Britisher yelled out in surprise. Rosanne's face suddenly became alive and Banner groaned.

"Rhino!" the Englishman exclaimed.

The Oriental leaped nimbly back to the front and stared across the driver's seat. Out the window, just keeping pace with the slow-moving van, was a huge animal. Its body looked like a slab of bluish-gray cement, and its short legs leaped back and forth, propelling its blunt head forward. The tiny black eyes stared evenly at the Britisher. Its long white horn, growing upward from its snout, gleamed in the sun like a well-brushed tooth.

Even as the two men watched, the beast moved in and rammed the side of the van again. There was the sound of metal rending and the wheel leaped out of the Britisher's hands. The vehicle lurched to the right and the Oriental, spitting out Far-Eastern expletives, threw his hands forward to help keep the wheels on their regular path.

"It's a white!" the Britisher exclaimed. "The largest of them all!"

"What is it doing so far north?" the Oriental cried in English.

"They've been slowly migrating ever since the law against killing them was passed. They were all over Uganda last year. Be careful!"

He turned the wheel feverishly to avoid another charge. Banner and Rosanne slid, bumping the length of the back, landing in a jumble against the far wall.

“No!” shouted the Oriental. “We can’t lose the trail!”

“No choice,” the Britisher replied. “Another direct hit and we’d be on two wheels.”

The Oriental moved over to stare at the huge form blasting through the underbrush.

“It’s fast,” he whistled.

“Third largest land animal,” the Britisher grimaced, “but as fast as a horse. We can only hope to outrun it.”

“Can’t this thing go any faster?”

“Not off the trail. Be on the lookout. They usually go in packs.”

“Great,” the Oriental spat. He spun to his own window while the driver tried to maneuver through the trees and foliage. They drove like madmen for a few seconds, smashing the plants in their path. The van began to stink of gasoline and the wheel felt hot in the Britisher’s hands.

“I think,” he gasped, “I think we’ve lost it.” The Oriental looked out the front window, then out both sides. All he could see were trees and tall grass. They had entered a veritable forest of seven-foot-tall brush. The reed-colored strands backed everything off except for the trunks of the ebony trees. The van mowed down the grass as it went, but they were effectively driving blind.

“I can’t spot it,” the Oriental reported, getting up. He slipped into the rear and moved toward the back windows, this time ignoring the sensual young girl and Banner, who had managed to untangle themselves and sit side by side for balance. The Oriental stared at the crushed wake outside the window. No rhino appeared behind them. It had completely disappeared. It was as if it had been a dream. But the large dent in the van’s side gave silent testimony to its reality.

“Nothing,” called out the Oriental. “It’s gone.”

The Britisher turned to look for himself. He looked carefully. And as he looked, the reedy grass in back of him parted, exposing a tableau of trees and trampled undergrowth. Rosanne struggled to her knees, the half-foot length of rope holding her legs in check and pulling cruelly at her calves. She looked beyond the Britisher’s staring head and saw a dark movement behind a grove of trees off to the right.

As she watched, a massive head of rhinoceri appeared around the makeshift corner. Soon the thundering group completely filled the windshield, bearing down on them with angry formality. She screamed out a warning, but the cloth allowed her only a muffled squeak. Banner saw her hands desperately twisting, and her shoulders trembled. Suddenly it occurred to the Britisher that she was acting very strangely.

His head was still turned toward the back window, the sound of their motor having covered the herd's earth-shaking approach. He stared at Rosanne's face. Her brow was wrinkled, her eyes pleaded, and heavy beads of sweat had appeared on her forehead. She nodded quickly, using her skull like a pointing finger. Finally, ages later, the Britisher turned around.

He shouted at the top of his lungs and swung the wheel to the left as hard as he could. The van leaped up and smashed into a tree. The Britisher met the dashboard with a sickening thud a second later. Rosanne ducked and turned in time to avoid colliding with the floor face first. Instead, she fell upon Banner, who pushed forward so that his body would shield her. Together they crashed into the back of the front seat. The Oriental, meanwhile, literally flew over their heads, flailing, into the front of the vehicle.

A second after that, the charging animals slammed into the wounded van. Like a huge gray wave hitting a seashore, they bashed it back, then slowly turned it over. The van dropped onto its side, shaking and tumbling its occupants. The only sound was the screeching of metal as it was being ripped apart.

In front of Banner's face a horn appeared, like a gigantic flower growing from the steel soil of the roof. Then another and another, until that side of the van looked like a bed of knives. Before anyone could regain his footing, the vehicle began to move again. It scraped across the ground with ever-increasing speed. The Oriental managed to climb over the unmoving form of the Britisher to the side window.

Poking his head out, he saw the entire area awash with snorting beasts, encircling and moving the van like a river taking a twig downstream. Suddenly, his viewpoint banked and the van gained even more speed. Then it became apparent that the vehicle was moving on its own—they had been pushed down a hill. The Oriental turned just as they were about to lay into another set of trees.

He fell back inside as the van's rear hit one trunk, spinning them to the side. Then they were once again sliding down facing forward. Through the windshield they could see more trees, grassland, and what looked like the end of the world. The view simply disappeared at that point, filled in by the glorious colors of the sunset. Banner realized that they were slipping toward a cliff's edge.

The Oriental scrambled over his associate and climbed toward the back doors. Both of them had been pushed in by the last crash, but they were still closed, The man reached the handles, twisted, and pushed. They stayed shut. He moved back a step. He screamed an oath and his arm moved forward in a blur. There was a crack, and the handle fell off. The door bucked but remained shut.

The Oriental stood back another step, keeping his balance. One leg shot out and the doors tore open slightly. As soon as the sliver of light appeared, the man leaped forward and tore at the space. With an echoing creak, one door finally fell open, dragging on the ground. The Oriental took one look back, then jumped out.

Banner and Rosanne watched as the small yellow body bounced out of their sight in the tall grass. Then they stared at each other in silent supplication. Her eyes screamed for him to change. He tried to translate his helplessness. It wasn't something he could control. He fought his handcuffs and tried to climb up the slanting van side. But the rope snaring his legs kept him from gaining any kind of leverage. Then he tried pushing Rosanne up. But with no hands and very little legs, it was impossible. They couldn't even cry out.

Suddenly, the van spun around. It had given a tree a glancing blow sufficient to change it, momentarily, into a whirling top. As a result, Banner, the girl, and the Britisher were thrown toward the back from centrifugal force. The unconscious Englishman, completely relaxed, tumbled out first with a bone-breaking abandon. Rosanne scrambled out next, with Banner just managing to kick out before the spinning momentum ran out.

They rolled over and over, losing sight of each other in the tall grass. Banner finally came to a dusty rest on the very edge of the cliff. He sat up just in time to see the van shoot off the end of the steep precipice, flying outward for twelve feet, then arcing down face forward into the rocky cliff face, which made a forty-five-degree angle with the flat land below. The van tumbled end over end, its shattered glass spinning out in all directions, reflecting the dusk's colors like fireworks. Suddenly, a liquid sheen spread out from it, and then the metal hunk was engulfed by a ball of flame. With a throaty scream the van dropped down into the forest, burning.

Banner turned away and saw an even more amazing scene. The Oriental was standing amid the tall reeds, and Bruce thought he could see where Rosanne might be sitting. But above them all, at the top of the hill, as if checking out their fate, was a line of rhinoceri stretching as far as Banner could see to either side. The sunset reflected highlights off their tough gray hides and made their little eyes shine.

They created muscular waves. When one moved, the whole line moved in succession to make room for it. Their three-toed hooves stamped and they reared. Then they all charged down the hill.

Banner immediately struggled to his feet. He looked behind him. The drop was impossible to navigate, especially in his present situation. The fall from the van had not loosened his bonds in the least. He quickly returned his gaze to the thundering line of animals.

He saw Rosanne's head appear amid the tall grass looking at the stampede in horror. The horizon was huge and the rhinos obscured almost all of it with their charging bodies and the cloud of dust that rose behind them.

The Oriental was closest to them, and he was running away as if possessed. He could feel their vibrations slamming into his feet and their breaths bearing down on him. The quaking of the ground was so violent that he could hardly find his own footing. In a last desperate attempt, he spun, anchored in his position, and struck his karate pose. The hands shot out but cracked ineffectively against the onrushing hides. He screamed in fury, then disappeared underneath the animal mob.

The beasts charged ever onward, seemingly seeking their own revenge on mankind. What could have charged them with such a venging fury? What force was fueling their actions? As the line trampled everything in its path, Banner saw one rhino's head move down to meet a tree which stood in its way. The three-and-a-half-foot-long horn dug in near the base and, unbelievably, it was the tree that fell in a flurry of branches, dirt, and rocks.

Rosanne spun and began to struggle toward Bruce. The half-foot length of rope constricting her legs tore into her skin. Her face twisted in pain and despair. Banner listened for the Englishman, but the animals' roar drowned out the sound of anything else, including his possible death cries. The girl continued to woefully move toward him.

He saw her mouth work beneath the cloth. He saw the gag begin to droop. The rhinos' onslaught filled his head. The world was shaking, ripping out of its space in the Universe. The girl was being covered in a blanket of dust, dirt, and grass. She was sinking. The gag slipped down until her red upper lip appeared. It was obscured a moment later by a fetid, slick ball of mucus-covered cloth. Then the hunk of cotton that filled her mouth dropped out.

She fell before the stampede, screaming his name.

Banner was thrown from his trance with a neck-breaking speed. The last thing he heard was the sound of metal exploding and rope shredding. What was left of his handcuffs cut a swath the size of a telephone out of a nearby tree. The ropes securing his legs turned into strands of wheat, and his gag turned into confetti. The immense green legs stretched out and the Hulk flew over the ground at a height of five feet. He had only to lower one leg to complete the one-hundred-foot trip. A rhino was about to slam into Rosanne's twisting body when two cannonball-sized fists buried themselves into its flank.

The three tons of charging animal astonishingly stopped with a vibrating snap. The two green feet rooted themselves on ether side of

the girl's body and one fist swung again like a wrecking ball. The subsequent sound echoed all the way down the line. Then the entire fourteen feet of armored animal collapsed.

Its brothers bringing up the rear tripped over its carcass, and the Hulk swung his fists, smashing the fallen beasts out of the way of his angel, until the line had passed. Dust covered the two of them, creating a rose-colored dream-cloud. Through it, the Hulk could see his angel's face. She was smiling, and tears of gratitude were rolling from her dark eyes. She said his name. Once, twice. He gently rolled her over. With one finger he snapped the handcuff chain. With two hands he pulled her leg ropes apart like saltwater taffy. He picked her up, and the cloud was gone.

He turned around with her in his arms. At the edge of the cliff stood the line of rhinoceri. Around the Hulk and the girl were three more rhinos, lying with their eyes closed and with froth covering their square mouths. From the cliffside, the tiny black eyes of the other animals pinned the Hulk to the spot. Then, from the center of the line, came the biggest rhinoceros of all.

It was almost seven feet tall and sixteen and a half feet long. It had two horns; the one in front measured five feet, two inches, and the rear horn was almost four and a half feet long. Its hide was thick and covered with protective wrinkles, and its glowing eyes held more triumph and knowledge than any of its followers. It was the king among them. The Hulk met its gaze. The two beasts understood each other.

The Hulk slowly lowered his angel to the ground. His broad hand moved her behind him. Rosanne, not understanding why they didn't simply run away, put her hand on his arm. He turned to face her. Softly, he took her hand away, then traced her facial features with his finger, as he had before. He smiled—not the smile of a contented child, but one of a self-assured gladiator about to enter the arena.

The Hulk turned back to the rhino king. The animal's head drooped, then rose, as if he were bowing. The Hulk's hands became fists, and the rhino snorted and charged. The Hulk leaped forward. The two beasts sped across the plain, the ground shaking from their brutal race.

They collided with a thunder's clap. The horn went under the green man's left arm, which contracted as the Hulk's right fist cut across the animal's hide. Dust spat up, creating waves around the conflict. The Hulk had the king in a headlock, and he was pummeling it with his free fist. The rhino anchored its feet and pulled its crown up. The green feet left the ground and the Hulk tumbled over the beast's back.

The rhino spun awkwardly and tried to gore the Hulk as he sat, but

the horn only served to help him up, since his skin was tougher than iron. The Hulk turned quickly, with his elbow bent to catch the beast behind the ear. Then his two hands slapped the rear legs and held on. He pulled. The legs slid, but stayed down. Just as the Hulk was about to pull again, the rhino kicked back.

The flat of both hooves slammed into the broad green chest. Then the Hulk's own legs swung upward and he fell backward five yards. Rosanne gasped and the rhino herd cried with triumph. But the Hulk was up, his face now infused with pain and hostility. He moved quickly forward and laid two roundhouse punches on the rhino's snout. Then he kicked it under the chin.

The rhino quickly retreated, shaking its head in surprise. The Hulk swung again, missed, and nearly slipped. Then he, too, moved back. The two of them stared at each other, both realizing that the fight was going to be tougher than either had expected. The rhino king looked as if it were considering surrender, but it saw there was no such thought in the minds of its fellows. The Hulk didn't care. He'd take them all on if he had to.

The rhino snorted, scratched the ground with its hooves, then charged forward again. The Hulk (to everyone's surprise) suddenly turned heel and ran. But he stopped at the first tree, a short baobab with a nine-foot-thick trunk. The huge green hands grabbed the bark and pulled. Roots tore from the earth as the rhino changed direction to charge again. It tracked down the Hulk and its horn lowered again like a lance.

At the last minute, the Hulk tore the trunk away completely, and the branches whipped into the rhino's head. The beast's hooves slid to an abrupt stop and began to backtrack. The Hulk dropped the tree and ran toward the struggling animal. As the rhino freed itself from the gripping branches, the Hulk hugged the tree again. Like Babe Ruth reaching for the sixty-second homer, the Hulk swung, and the apex of the trunk hit the rhino just under its eye. The body spun twice around. Then the knees buckled and the king collapsed. The Hulk stared at his fallen opponent, then dropped the tree and purposefully walked toward the creature. He dropped to his knees before it and gently lifted its head. He looked at both sides of the head, and then he lowered it to the ground again by its forward horn.

With a sudden cry, the Hulk lifted the tree, planted one massive palm against its bottom, and hurled it away like a shotput. The thirty-foot wooden shaft flew across the field, over the shaking bodies of the rhino herd, and followed the van down the cliff. By the time it reached the bottom, it had been split into torn logs.

The herd's heads turned as one to stare at the new champion.

Several of the rhinos moved forward to check their fallen leader. Then they began to move sadly away, disappearing into the tall grass. Within minutes the only rhino in sight was the dead one at the Hulk's feet. The green monster looked down at his defeated opponent. One empty eye stared up, and within it the Hulk saw his own reflection. He saw his bestial face and his heavy, cracked skin. He saw his mane moving like restless waves, blown by the night wind.

He turned to look at his angel, whose features were disappearing into the darkness. She was safe . . . The Hulk lay down next to the giant gray body and closed his angry eyes.

Ten

Banner saw him in the distance. He walked slowly with his head hung low, as if he were carrying a great weight. The legs didn't stumble, however; they walked with a steady, strong rhythm. His own body floated along, bringing him closer to the approaching figure.

At last the figure raised his head and looked at him. The look was perplexed and quizzical. Then it showed recognition. They knew each other. The figure held out his arms to keep the floating Banner from running into him.

And Banner brought his own arms up to each side of the figure's chest. The two stared at each other with fascination and an odd sort of comfort. Then Banner's eyes grew wide and his hands reared back, as if he had plunged his palm into a hole of worms. His legs kicked and his mouth opened in sudden panic. He began beating at the image before him, but his fists went through the figure as if it were made of air.

Then the two hands released him sorrowfully, and Banner's flailing sent him tumbling in the opposite direction. The figure watched the tiny, fidgeting body disappear into the distance. His hand raised as if to bid Banner farewell.

Banner shuddered. The hands that had held him were green. The face he had stared into was green. The eyes that had watched him were green. He spun and faced a long pit. At the bottom was a dark hole that promised insanity, mania, delirium, derangement, lunacy, madness, dementia, aberration, and delusions. He was gaining speed

as he fell toward it. No amount of movement slowed his descent. The hole grew wider until the entire pit was the black hole. It reached up to him and wrapped around his body like a choking death.

But he did not die. Instead, he awoke. The black hole was now dotted by bright white sparkles. Then he heard the grass blowing in the wind, the faraway cry of birds, and the chattering of monkeys. He felt a weight on his chest. He looked up and saw Rosanne sleeping, her head resting on him. He turned and saw a dead rhinoceros lying a great distance beyond. Vultures were picking at its carcass.

Its blood stench would soon bring other wild animals, he realized. They had to get out of there.

"Rosanne," he said, shaking her shoulder, "Rosanne come on, wake up."

"Don't," she muttered, still sleeping.

"Rosanne," he repeated.

"No," she mumbled, "no school today."

Banner moved his torso out from beneath her and gently held her up. Shaking her again, he whispered her name. Finally, her eyes opened, not recognizing him. Then her memory clicked and her innocent expression dissolved in tears. She wrapped her quaking arms around Bruce's head and wailed.

The doctor quickly pulled her back and held one hand across her mouth.

"Rosanne, please," he hissed, shaking her head gently. "I know it's hard, but pull yourself together. Neither of us can stand much more of this."

He held her until the tears had run dry and she weakly nodded her head. Then he helped her up. She leaned on him, sniffing.

"Bruce, I can't understand. Why is all this happening to me? How could this happen to you? I'm just so confused," she finished weakly.

Uncharacteristically, Banner laughed. Rosanne looked up at him in surprise, momentarily chilled by the thought that he might have gone mad. But his face held only a tired sort of mirth.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but you sounded just like a cartoon I remembered. You ever see the Popeye cartoon where he and Bluto are digging for gold? Bluto hits this dead end with a big stop sign and this billboard saying 'NO GOLD HERE.' Well, he just turns to the audience and says, 'You know, sometimes I get so *depressed.'* Then he starts bawling."

The memory was so incongruous, and it reminded Rosanne so much of her own almost forgotten childhood, that she found herself laughing. Spinach was, after all, green.

“So what are we going to do, Popeye?” she asked.

“Well, Olive Oyl, let’s see if we can’t find someplace to spend the night safely.”

Curtiss was dressed in someone’s idea of a diaper. It wrapped around his waist and crotch in an uncomfortable bunch. He wanted to spread it out a little bit, but his hands were shackled together and attached by a chain to a metal collar around his throat.

That, in turn, was attached by another chain to the metal collar of the person in front of him and by a third chain to someone behind him. Their legs were not shackled, but still, there was little danger of escape. Six people latched together by their necks and wrists weren’t going to go far in the tropical forest. If one got attacked by a tiger, they would all have to hang around for dessert. And if one fainted, they would all choke. Besides all that, lugging around twenty-five pounds of metal wasn’t fun at a flat run.

It wasn’t even fun at the pace he kept up now, which was a steady shuffle. Well, the one good thing about it was that he was not too inclined to tap his left forefinger fingernail, throw a karate kick with his right foot, or pick his ear and nose.

Curtiss had been led along with sadistic regularity by a team of tall dark men for what seemed like several weeks, but which was actually less than a day and a half. But with no sleep, little rest, and even less sustenance, it just seemed like ages. Thankfully, Curtiss’s training held him in good stead, and the rest of the captives, who had been traveling a lot farther before he was “recruited,” were used to it.

In front of him was a broad, red-haired man, and behind him was a slim, tall girl with short blond hair. They had made rudimentary introductions when he was linked to them on the outskirts of the Cameroon. He was Morry and she was Kelli. They were both single and had few relatives—in the case of Kelli, none. In other words, they would hardly be missed. And if they were, their disappearance would be rationalized away. They, like everyone else, were wearing tribal versions of underwear. For modesty’s sake, the women were allowed tops. It would probably be the only vestige of dignity they would ever be allowed.

All together, the group numbered thirty: five groups of six, with roughly a two-to-four male-female ratio. White women were the number-one commodity here.

Curtiss was beginning to look forward to meeting the General on his own terms. He was thinking about that when thirty slaves were roughly stopped in their tracks. Then several solid swings of a stout stick convinced them all to sit down.

“Quiet,” an accented voice hissed. “Silence or death.”

All the slaves took the easy route. Their wardens had gathered in a group. Curtiss took note of their short-sleeved bush outfits with the two belts of ammunition and the large holstered pistols. They had several other holsters, but those held the likes of whips, clubs, handcuffs, and other delightful treats. He also took this opportunity to count the guards. For the two and a half dozen of them, there were fifteen guards—actually, only fourteen, since one slaver was on Curtiss’s side. He had kindly arranged this nifty infiltration.

The guards broke up and some of them moved back to their captives. The ten remaining wardens huddled together, talking in low tones. The C.I.A. plant moved up and down Curtiss’s row, ostensibly checking the chains. He kept up his cover by insulting the men and offering all manner of rude suggestions to the women.

When he reached Curtiss, he said, “We’ve spotted a campfire. They’re going to investigate.” Curtiss reacted characteristically by seething in a threatening manner. He got a choking tug at his collar as reward for his acting. Then he watched as the fifteen guards began to pull out their guns and whips. He certainly pitied anyone who was caught around that campfire tonight.

“The fire will keep any wild animals away,” Rosanne explained to a slightly paranoid Banner. “If we slept in the dark, we might make some leopard’s meal.”

“It just seems to be an unnecessary attraction,” said Bruce. “Lord knows it’s hot enough as it is.”

“I know.” Rosanne smiled. “But that’s the way it is in the wild kingdom.”

Banner smiled in return and leaned back against a tree trunk. It wasn’t a casual movement. He had carefully checked the entire area for snakes before they had settled down. Rosanne finished tending the fire and came to sit down next to him. She cuddled up against him and Bruce put an arm around her. They stared at the fire for a while.

“What are you thinking?” Rosanne finally asked.

“Nothing,” Banner said automatically.

“Wrong question,” the girl replied. “I know what you’re thinking—the same thing I’m thinking.” She paused for a second, then asked lightly, “So what do you think? Do you think we’ll ever get out of this?”

“Well,” Bruce mused just as lightly, “I think, I think. And my thoughts lead me to think that you think that I think that you think I don’t think enough about that. But I don’t think you are right. You

want to know what I think?"

"I think so," she said, deadpan.

"I think . . . I think, mind you, that all this thinking is giving me a stinking headache."

Rosanne laughed with delight, but Banner suddenly leaped up, tore a flaming log from the fire, and hurled it into the woods.

Rosanne didn't even get a chance to exclaim before she heard a scream and Banner pounded after the thrown torch. A moment later, she was standing up and he came tearing back out of the brush holding a large gun. He stopped on the other side of the fire and pointed it at her. With a little shriek she ducked and he pulled the trigger. A boom tore across the campsite. Then she felt her hand being grasped and Banner pulled her up. They started running.

"I saw a flash," he gasped in between deep breaths. "I knew it must be more of the General's men. It was. I shot one," he said, waving the pistol before her face.

Then she heard the shouts of the other men and the noises of pursuit. In a panic, she ignored the stones and branches punching at her feet and the shadows that assailed her vision. She took her strength from Banner's arm which was locked in hers. The two of them raced through the forest.

But the darkness and their pursuers conspired against them. Banner's foot got caught in some sort of log pile and as he went down, Rosanne felt a cord wrap around her neck with a stinting bite. She heard Bruce curse, and then she was being pulled back with a steady strength.

Thankfully, her feet got tangled and she fell before the whip could draw her into the slaver's clutches. Banner's newly acquired weapon spoke again and the girl felt the constriction loosen. Bruce's hand gripped her and they were off again. The next moment, the reports of other guns began their chorus behind them. There was a whistling in her ears, but Banner's voice drowned it out.

"Don't stop," he warned.

Her legs moved with an energy she didn't know she possessed. She kept pace with Bruce even without hanging onto his arm. For he had released her now and they ran side by side through the forest. They ran until the branches had stung lines of welts across their ankles. They ran across fallen trees that knocked them down. But they rolled to their feet and kept going.

Their breath burned like fire in their chests; their legs felt like sacks of sand; their arms ached from swinging back and forth. They ran until stinging tears coursed down their faces. They ran until sweat

made their clothes into second skins. Their running became second nature. It was something they both did to keep alive. They ran until they had both been doing it so long that they wouldn't know what to do if they weren't running.

There was one last, far-off boom. Just before she stopped thinking, Rosanne heard the heavy whine of the bullet ricocheting off a tree. Then it grazed her temple and she went down.

Banner pulled himself up short and dropped across her. He listened intently for any clue of further stalking. When he was sure they didn't know they had hit her, Banner hurriedly rose to his knees and turned her over. Although she was unconscious, she moaned. Banner felt a shudder rise from deep inside him. She was alive, thank God.

He quickly checked the wound on her forehead, then pulled her body up across his shoulders in a fireman's carry. He wasn't about to desert her after all this. The Hulk wouldn't, so he wouldn't. She was more than special now. She meant something to both sides of him. As he began to trot quickly away with her limp form on his back, he began to understand how things had changed.

The rational part of him had accepted the Hulk's existence, but only as a challenge. It might be a savior to others, but it was still a beast to him—that uncontrollable, unreasoning rage that existed in everyone, but somehow in him, manifested itself as another being.

Well, he would not succumb to it. He could not. If he allowed the monster to control his life, it would prove that he was less than a man. The animal side of him, being irrational, chose not to fight him; it would appear only when Banner could not control it. But he swore that he would control it. It would be Bruce Banner who would be the master. Nothing could stop him now.

Banner drove himself as he never had before. The girl on his shoulders stopped being a human and became a weight he had to bear. His brain stopped channeling ideas and simply served to push his muscles on. His eyes stopped taking in details. They merely picked out landmarks and possible dangers. His ears shut down almost completely, letting in only the most rudimentary of sounds.

Banner's legs moved, and the moon moved across the night sky. He kept moving while the stars slowly faded and while the sun crossed the other half of the sphere. He moved until his mind could no longer force his ragged nerves forward. The mind knew that with any more the body would begin to burn outward from the heart. The organs would boil, the blood would crash through the veins, the bones would shatter—all as a result of the man's determined, maniacal, furious, despairing energy.

The mind chose to shut down.

Banner's legs faltered. He stumbled, then, slowly, fell, the day's first rays of sun caressing his exhausted head. Rosanne slid silently off his back to fold onto the ground. She had slipped from unconsciousness into a troubled slumber. She mumbled in her sleep, her expression concerned. Banner watched her unthinkingly while diagnosing himself in a separate part of his subconscious.

The eyes and lips showed signs of dehydration. The arms, legs, and back were suffering muscle spasms. The internals were on the verge of heat stroke. The soles of his feet and the palms of his hands curled with muscle cramps. The brain displayed evidence of delirium. Prescription: food and rest, lots of it, immediately.

Banner's tortured head arose. His agony-ridden eyes opened. Before him, between two bushes, was a fence. The aching hands reached out. The tortured legs gained leverage. The doctor began to crawl. His brain cried out words like "sanctuary" and "safety." He reached the metal bars only to find metal links just beyond them. His pain-racked neck turned and he spied a hole in the wall. Banner pulled himself up and stumbled to the hole. He half-crawled, half-fainted through the small opening.

He tumbled through, climbed to his feet and took three more steps before collapsing again. His eyelids snapped shut and sprang open like a camera's shutter. As they created a visual strobe, two dark shapes slid into the developed picture. Banner's irises opened wide, letting in all the early morning light.

He was staring at two boots. His parched, split lips opened after a struggle, as if they were soldered together.

"H . . . e . . . p," was all he could say.

A deep voice replied. A voice that came from a huge head. A voice that a part of Banner had heard before.

"Oh, my," said the General, "how good of you to come."

Eleven

Banner was dumped, with little ceremony, into a well-kept, extensive, and carefully guarded dungeon. His every need was cared for and his every whim was ignored. Sustenance and rest he had plenty of, for the next week, but little things like sunshine, exercise, company, and freedom were non-existent. In twice the time it took him to collapse, he recovered, and in the remaining few days he was able to regain some semblance of strength.

While his body recuperated, his mind descended into the realm of paranoid fantasy. His wardens always seemed to have a special interest in him. His food always seemed more ample than the other servings he saw lining the cook's tray. He sometimes awoke suddenly at night hearing Rosanne's cries. He thought that the guards knew English, but that they remained silent on purpose. And quietly, he seethed over his preferential treatment.

He saw the others from his cell window by standing on his cot. He watched them handling the menial jail work, scrubbing floors, hauling supplies, and entertaining the employees all while chained at the neck, wrists, or ankles. It was a deepest, darkest African movie come true. Banner spent many hours with his own slightly warped psyche. He thought about depression, anxiety attacks, acute frustration, and even considered the nature of suicide.

Thus, it was a disguised blessing when he was pulled out of his solitary cell and brought into the very bowels of the prison. There, in large metal cages, sat coed lines of slaves. Each face was marked with a new education in subservience. The men stared gloomily at the hay

floor. The women were more hasty and nervous about averting their eyes. Some backs, legs, and shoulders bore lash marks. A select few were even tattooed, or, more harshly, branded with their masters' designs.

The sobering company of these human beings did much to dry Banner's soggy mental outlook. He was pushed, pulled, and prodded into a tall stone room, lined on three sides by rusted metal bars. Five other prisoners were inside, and his appearance evened the score to three men and three women. The females were uniformly young and slim, and their hair was cropped short. They shared a mutual expression of despair.

In comparison, the men were veritable work-horses. One, a redhead, had broad shoulders and solid legs. The other was a lithe specimen. Banner was the "ninety-eight-pound weakling" among them. The auburn-haired man's face showed that he had not yet fully accepted his captivity, but the other man exhibited a calm craftiness. There was a smug secret knowledge behind his eyes, like a cat's, but it only showed when no guard was in sight. He knew something, but he wasn't talking.

Banner made the awkward introduction. It was hard to shake hands when they were chained to each other. The blonde girl was Kelli, the mousy brunette was Jackie, and the smaller blonde was Beverly. The red-haired guy was Morry, and the clever man with the Cheshire grin was Bradford.

"Does anyone know what's going to happen to us?" Bruce asked cautiously once night had fallen for the eighth time since his capture.

There was silence for about fifteen seconds. Then the blonde named Kelli laughed nervously.

"I think, uh, one of the guards has been watching me and, uh . . ."—she bit her lip—". . . I think he wants to ask whoever's in charge . . ." She choked and started sobbing. The red-haired man put one strong arm around her.

Banner, looked from face to face. Jackie was scowling in quiet rebellion. Beverly looked sick. But Bradford looked rock-steady, like he had just decided to prosecute a rapist.

"Naw," said Morry in his gruff voice. "All the guards do that to the girls to make them feel like garbage. In addition to the regular treatment, it breaks them down faster."

Kelli looked up at him in supplication, hoping that what he said was true. He smiled reassuringly.

"He's right," Brad said evenly. "Simple terror is not what our wardens are after. They're keeping us all on pinhooks for some secret reason. I've seen groups moved out of here in a minute flat. But we

thirty . . . pardon me, thirty-one"—he nodded at Bruce—"we're special for some reason."

Banner looked at them all. Their faces glowed in the moonlight that was streaming in the one-barred window. He thought about fate, destiny, a large moss-colored monster, and Dr. Maxwell Wittenborn. What could he be working on? And would it need guinea pigs?

The General's laughing face appeared in his mind. Where had he seen it before? Suddenly, the whole story formed itself like a jigsaw puzzle instantaneously solved. He hadn't seen the General before. Or, at least, one part of him hadn't.

Sudden bright light flooded the large pen. Kelli shrieked quickly as the beams swept them all into silhouette. Banner started, but Brad's strong hand on his arm kept him from inadvertently choking his chain-mate.

"Everyone," Brad said, "get up on my count of three. Get ready."

The group shifted to the balls of their feet. Banner followed suit.

"All set?" Brad inquired.

Jackie rebalanced herself.

"All right. One, two, three."

The group rose as one.

"Very good." Brad smiled. "Practice makes perfect."

He moved over to the window, put his unshackled hand on the sill just above his head, and lightly pulled himself up.

"What is it?" Bruce asked.

"I'm not sure," he answered. "The light's right in my eyes. Wait a minute. A spotlight is shifting . . . wow!"

The six others began talking at once.

"Wow?"

"What?"

"Is it a rescue?"

"What wow?"

"What's going on?"

"Hey!"

Brad lowered himself and pulled them toward the opposite bars.

"The General's mansion is lit up like a power company," he whispered conspiratorially. "And beyond that is a fully outfitted airport—a small one, but one that seems to be awfully busy right now."

"Wittenborn," Banner muttered.

Then it was Brad's turn to exclaim. "What?"

Bruce looked into eyes of molten lava. “Nothing,” he said hastily in defense.

“No, come on, Bruce,” Brad said in a whisper to the doctor. “What do you know about Dr. Wittenborn?”

Banner grabbed the agent’s arms in sudden kinship, unavoidably pulling Jackie’s wrist into his ribs.

“Ouch,” he said. “Sorry.”

The girl nodded absently. He returned his attention to Brad. “Who are you?” he demanded with sudden vehement concern.

“Don’t mind me, Banner,” the man smirked. “I am no one. Just a Joe on a job. Who are you?”

“I’m a doctor,” Banner blurted out, completely trusting these people who shared his predicament. “I know Wittenborn—or, at least, of his work.”

“How well?”

“Very well. Verbatim—the written material, at least.”

“You don’t know what he’s working on now?”

“No, but I feel it must be something involved with gamma radiation. He had already announced to the field that he was through with neutronics.”

“Gamma? Is that worse?” interjected Morry.

Banner turned to him, his voice deadly earnest. “In the right dose, much worse. Believe me, much worse.” He felt Brad’s hand constrict on his arm again, but with a far more painful pressure this time. He hastily spun back, a hurt question forming.

“Don’t panic them,” Brad said to his ears only. “They’re in deep enough as it is.” He paused, as if negotiating with his brain, and he came to a fast decision. “Listen, Doc, you’re a good egg. I’m going to do my best to get us out of here. You hear me? *All* of us. I’ll need your help. When I make my move, you get them out of here. Move for the airport runway and keep moving. Do what you have to, but get out of here. And the best of luck. Do we understand each other?”

Banner looked the man up and down. The muscular body was covered only in a pair of dirty shorts. He was unkempt, smelly, and fairly thin, but somehow Banner knew he had to trust him.

“Yes,” he said. “We understand each other.”

Brad nodded and released his arm.

At that moment, the main door at the other end of the room swung open. More light and guards poured in. Each wore two holstered guns and carried an electric prod in his hand. They swept from cell to cell in their spotlessly pressed uniforms, rattling the bars with their high-

voltage clubs. Anyone unfortunate enough to have been leaning on the bars or sleeping with his chains against the metal was brutally awakened.

The warders shouted things in the universal language of terror. Before half a minute had passed, all thirty-one captives had reached their feet in wide-eyed fear. As soon as the guards were positive everyone displayed the proper amount of petrified respect, they lined up in two ranks of ten on either side of the main doorway. They reached a lethargic stance of attention and a man just to the right of the entrance shouted in a guttural voice.

Sweeping through the opening came the living mass of dark gristle know as the General. His crimson uniform was heavy with bright decorations of every color on both breasts. His torso was just a bit too small for his medicine ball of a head, but this only made him more grandoise. In one hand he carried a solid gold staff which reflected the mansion's bright beams, as did his boots' silver buckles and the array of buttons lining his jacket.

His hands were encased in spotless leather gloves of deep black. He looked like a Five-Star General of Death. The hands quivered and rose up. Slowly, deliberately, the General pointed to one person in each of the five cages. The line of guards ran forward to do his bidding as each victim was singled out. The screaming, cuffing, scuffling, and moaning had just diminished when the huge red-clothed arm moved up again.

Three more people were torn from their fellows, and the total of eight prisoners were joined at the wrists, necks, and ankles. Among them were Beverly and Bruce Banner. As they were pathetically marched out, Bruce turned to look back. Bradford Curtiss's expression was empty, but his eyes held a solemn promise—a promise, Banner realized, that he was ready to die for.

The party was in full swing when the captives arrived. The fifty-yard-long throne room was brimming with delirious revelers, who were drinking huge magnums of champagne, tooting little silver horns, and hurling their glasses into an enormous fireplace. There was even a corner where a shooting gallery had been set up.

The only place in the massive hall that was not a site of celebration was a gigantic plexiglass box that sat on the far side. Filled to the brim with scientific machinery, it was a hollow reminder of sanity amidst the madness that raged on three sides of it. The eight slaves were marched in a satiric procession across the slick marble-covered floor.

They passed the huge blocks of stairwells on either side. They saw the quiet expanse of the African night beyond the open balconies.

They saw the huge tree table, and the drunken faces swirling by them as if warped in a funhouse hall of mirrors. Feet appeared to trip them. Toes poked their shins. Wine slopped across their torsos. Spittle rained across their heads. The guards screamed and gave out mock orders, strutting like toy Hitlers.

Finally, they were dragged before a tarpaulin covering a structure that reached up fifteen feet. They were turned to face the jeering crowd, which gathered before them like an expectant audience at an ancient Roman game. Banner turned and looked into the plastic cage. Sitting in the midst of the metal, looking like a zombie, was Maxwell Wittenborn. He met Bruce's gaze for a moment and then turned away.

Banner also turned. He was on the end of the chained line and had to lean back to see clearly. There at the head of the huge wooden table was a massive, golden throne. It was carved in glorious detail and outfitted in red velvet and black leather. Seated on it, her head spotlighted by a circle of soft crimson, was Rosanne.

She was dressed simply in a long white robe. Her head twisted and her eyes screwed shut, but it wasn't because she had spotted Banner. Bruce saw her fingers curl above the lip of the table and her upper arm muscles bunch. He realized that she was strapped to the arms of the chair. A harsh cry snapped his attention back to what lay before him. A high-ranking government official, resplendent in a perfectly tailored three-piece pinstriped suit, was addressing the gathered dignitaries, soldiers, representatives, rowdies, and floozies.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" were his first words. "We present the entertainment of the evening. For a truly fitting convocation, I give you the leader of all leaders, the ruler of all rulers, the master of all masters, everyone's commanding officer, the General!"

That buffoonery over, the real farce began. The General moved ponderously forward with an expression which was meant to demand attention, but which actually made it look like he had a bad case of gas. A monumental ovation accompanied his approach, one that shook the hall and stung the shackled people's ears. Then a black hand rose and the cheer subsided like a tape recorder being shut off.

"Gathered friends," the General said in his best Sunday voice, "this is a momentous occasion. I will not go into ponderous detail, but you have been chosen to witness a night which will change the course of history."

Things are proceeding according to form, Banner thought. Every power-mad demon played to the same tune.

"Tonight is the beginning of a reign never before witnessed in this puny world. Tonight I will prove . . . with a little might"—one gloved hand reached for the ceiling—"and a little genius"—the other hand

flew up across from its opposite—"that the General can bring the planet Earth to its knees!" The two palms slapped together with an echoing bang and slammed down onto the head of an invisible enemy.

The gathered throng reacted like a drag-crazed rock-concert audience getting a first glimpse of their idols. It wasn't serious to them, Banner realized. They were just watching a favorite entertainer.

"Behold!" said the man of the hour. One hand gripped the tarpaulin and pulled. The cover fell in a dusty heap at the slaves' feet and the crowd gasped. For there, in the midst of them, was another plexiglass box with an almost exact recreation of a middle-class American living room, circa 1979.

There was the couch which could be pulled out into a convertible bed. There were the rows of bookshelves with the encyclopedia, the dictionary, and a set of gilt-lettered, leather-bound classics. There was the artificial wood paneling and the fake stone chimney surrounding a fireplace that didn't work. There was the plush recliner chair placed one inch from the clear wall. There was the stereo component set with the long row of records. There was the twenty-five-inch color television in the oak-simulated frame. There were the card table and the standing lamps and the white Touch-Tone telephone and the glass ashtrays and the ceramic coasters.

A chill ran up Banner's spine and across his entire body. He got the awful feeling that the true nightmare was only about to begin.

Bradford Curtiss moaned. It was a soul-shaking rattle of woe that came from his lips, one that was as professionally perfect as he could make it. If done exactly as taught on the fourth floor of the Boston, Massachusetts, training center, no one, no matter what his nationality, could believe you weren't suffering from at least a ruptured spleen or appendicitis.

Sure enough, the remainder of his companions looked over at him in concern. Kelli raised her head from Morry's shoulder. Jackie placed a tentative hand on his leg. He moaned again.

"Hey, Brad," Jackie said, "what's the matter?"

Curtiss let the exclamation wheeze off.

"Hey, he's sick," said Morry.

Curtiss added a slight groan.

"Hey, I said he's sick!" Morry shouted.

Curtiss started to gag.

"Hey! Hey, he's sick!" Morry bellowed. "Somebody get in here! He's sick!"

As best as they could in their chained position, they made a racket.

Their feet pounded, and the ones who could reach them rattled their metal links against the bars. Curtiss continued to add counterpoint to the clatter by howling unbearably. Luckily, a few guards were conscious or he might have been performing all night. Three came in angrily, looking into the different cages, their eyes bloodshot.

They finally spotted Curtiss's prone body and Morry's frenetic gesturing. They grouped outside the bars and stared like it was the monkey cage at the Bronx Zoo.

"Hey!" Morry exploded. "Hey, hey, hey, you! Hey, come on! He's sick! Can't you see that?" Curtiss moaned his most realistic moan.

The man in the middle of the guard trio turned his head and spat behind him. He grimaced, hooked his thumbs in his belt, and drawled in a language only his fellows—and Curtiss—could understand.

"The General don't need these people anymore, anyway. Take the guy out and kill him."

Bradford groaned really realistically.

"Make it quiet," said the guard as an afterthought. "We don't want to panic his friends." He grinned, displaying his tobacco-stained teeth. The two other guards quickly unlocked the cage and moved in, anxious to do their superior's bidding. Morry moved sullenly back as keys were fitted into Curtiss's lead necklace and bracelets. The locks clicked open.

Then one warder grabbed his legs while the other took his shoulders. They began to haul him out.

"Be careful," said Jackie. "He could have appendicitis."

"Good luck, Brad," called Kelli.

The three remaining in the cage huddled together, their faces as gray and blank as headstones. Curtiss rolled his eyes up for a quick last look. Then he moaned again and curled a hand across his face as the jail cell door slammed shut with an empty clang.

The three guards took him into the hallway, practically licking their lips in anticipation. As they laid him down on the tile floor and conferred how best to end his life, Bradford Curtiss, supposedly in great pain, did a very strange thing.

He picked his nose.

One smiling guard turned back to him, screwing a silencer onto his service revolver. They had decided to put a bullet into his chest here, and then do something enjoyable outside, like chop off his head and use it as a soccer ball. The smiling guard got down on one knee. He placed the pistol barrel in Curtiss's stomach.

Curtiss's hands stretched out as if tying an invisible shoelace. Then one hand moved up.

The smiling guard leaped backward off the floor to a record height of ten feet, smashing into the ceiling at the corner of the hall. His back slid down the wall and he fell head first to the floor, still smiling. His arms and legs shook even after he was dead. His hands were empty. His gun was in Curtiss's fist.

Curtiss's back hunched as he shot the gun. The two remaining guards dropped as if hit by a killer germ.

Curtiss leaped and slid on his knees toward the guard who had ordered his impromptu execution. He began to pull the late man's uniform off. He had planned well. The dungeon had none of the advanced security devices such as a video camera system. So as long as no one decided to get productive and go on a surprise round, he could change clothes in peace. He thought about those who remained in the cells. I'll be back, he silently promised them. If not me, then someone. It's a promise. He thought about himself. One weapon down, three to go. At least the fingernail, acid ball, and toe pin weren't as embarrasing to implement.

He held no optimism for his continued chances. But there were good odds that he might make it—maybe. Actually, the odds weren't so good. Really, they were pretty lousy. Face it, Curtiss, he told himself, Jimmy the Greek wouldn't even cover your bet. He was about to walk into the den of the African Devil himself: the General, several hundred pounds of immature insanity. He was going against the guards, the guns, and the government. But he had to make it, he told himself. He had to. After all, he had made a date for the weekend with Dr. Porter back at the C.I.A. lab.

The eight captives had been sealed into the plexiglass box by a team of craftsmen. Their doorway, like the one on Wittenborn's box, was locked with a clear bolt as strong as six-inch steel. The eight walked around the living room in uncomfortable confusion, fingering the furniture and testing the appliances. They all worked. The lights flicked on and the television was soon showing a situation comedy.

The craftsmen then moved the Wittenborn enclosure over toward its twin. The General smiled benignly, looking like a rotten, split grapefruit. Soon the two clear cubes were side by side and some of the slaves were beginning to get restless. One, a burly, bald man, hurled a lamp against the wall closest to the guests. But the General only giggled.

"That's right, my friend," he called. "Get angry. Get as angry as you want. It will only help."

The huge body raised its right hand. On cue, half a dozen guards, perfect examples of spit and polish, moved over to the chair where

Rosanne sat and made a rough semicircle around her. The General moved his other hand like an arrow toward Wittenborn, who sat amongst his machinery like a tragic Greek statue.

Suddenly the scientist rose and walked over to the two walls that now stood between him and the captives. He put both palms against the plastic and placed his lips close to the transparent partitioning. The hall quieted as the once-proud researcher opened his mouth to speak. As the words were croaked out, the cavernous room was as silent as an empty vault.

"Please," Maxwell Wittenborn said first, "forgive me. I would not do this if there were any choice left open. But you do not know what the General is capable of. He knows just enough to keep you alive for months, even years, of excruciating torture. Just when you expect that nothing could cause you more pain, he devises a new technique. And you cannot die."

The General pursed his lips in a grin, as if about to modestly deny a compliment.

"This I would gladly suffer for having allowed myself to fall back into his hands. This I would gladly suffer, instead of revealing to him the technique of my new gamma treatment."

Banner rose unsteadily from behind the card table, his mind filled with a new dread.

"But he would not try to entrap me that way. He knew too well." Wittenborn's tears were now in evidence, rolling down his cheeks, across his lab coat collar and onto his soiled striped shirt. "He knew too well that he need only threaten my children with it. He told me that my son had already died horribly on the Congo River. He told me that my daughter would not be so lucky."

Rosanne's head arched forward and her mouth opened. The guard to her immediate right cupped one hand under her chin and gripped the back of her neck with another. The guard on her left placed a strong palm on her forehead and clutched her larynx. Together they choked off her words and brought her head back to the red velvet.

"He knew," the scientist said, fighting sobs. "He knew that was all he would have to say. He knew that he would leave me helpless. So I must apologize. I must say that I am sorry. But, considering what tortures he can inflict, you may be fortunate to die this way."

As Wittenborn finished and turned away, the captives stumbled up and ran to the wall, screaming. All but one of them pounded at the glassy division. All but one of them cried and shouted and swore and retched and ranted. That one stood in back of the card table like a victim of Medusa. But the hands gripped the table rim with a white intensity.

The crowds and the General did not notice him. They were enjoying the overture to the show. The rotund dictator's voice boomed out as a counterpoint to the slaves' hysterical protests.

"Yes, the Gamma Treatment, ladies and gentlemen! The device that guarantees my manifest destiny! Tonight the world is mine! Watch, witness, and believe!"

The dark paw pointed. All eyes were locked on the prematurely bent body of Dr. Wittenborn as he moved through his diaphanous cavern of machinery. Suddenly, he brought up a surprisingly small rectangle of steel. Its only obtrusion was a small switch on the top and a wide glass lens, also in a rectangular shape, like one side of a pair of spectacles, on the front. The scientist set up his wooden chair facing the crowd and placed the device on it.

Then he switched it on.

Curtiss reached the edge of the throng. They had all been so intent on watching whatever lay before them that no one had noticed how he looked somewhat different from the other guards, nor how his uniform didn't quite fit. He moved forward as the sound of a fight filtered out to his ears. He still couldn't see what everyone was looking at, since the crowd was tightly packed and many were standing on their tiptoes. Expressions of rapt attention infused their pampered faces.

The noise of violence grew louder. It sounded like a small group of people were having a vicious rumble in front of this lust-corrupted audience. Curtiss switched directions quickly and headed for the wide marble stairwell on his left. Near the top he was able to find a small place with a good view. He edged between an overweight woman dressed to the gills and a tuxedoed man with a mouthful of capped teeth. Then he turned to see what all the fuss was about.

Before him was an incredible sight. Seven people who he had been with for almost two weeks were in a clear cube, decorated in early Americana, tearing each other apart. They weren't just fighting or wrestling. They were literally ripping each other to shreds. Their punches were brutally strong, their kicks devastating. Some men were hauling others over their heads and hurling them the length of the enclosure. The women had forgotten their femininity and were battling like alley cats, slashing with claw-like hands and biting like sharks. Bullies and victims were one and the same, and ruined bodies flapped against the plastic wall and were flung across the furniture.

The books carpeted the floor. The paneling was shattered like cracked glass, the artificial stone chimney was a dust pile, and the chairs were tattered skeletons of spring and balsa wood. The TV and

the stereo had turned to husks of exposed, sputtering wires, the ashtrays had become bloodstained clubs, and the telephone was tightly wrapped around a now motionless girl.

Curtiss watched in stunned silence as the five remaining captives beat at each other with a rabid fury. He averted his eyes from the terrible scene for a moment and saw an aged black man in an adjoining cube, sitting on his knees by a chair, his head in his hands, his body quaking with sudden jolts. He was crying with a sickening and shocking sorrow.

The agent turned back. Three more people had fallen, as much from their own savage madness as from their wounds. The two remaining people blasted at each other. A petite blonde managed to get hold of a card table leg, and with an amazingly powerful swing, she brought the whole thing across the head of the man who was trying to scratch her eyes out. She delivered the blow with such force that the table exploded, and the man somersaulted and slid the entire length of the crystalline prison, bouncing off one wall.

Curtiss suddenly spied another prisoner. He had been behind the card table, and he now crouched in a tense, defensive position. The man looked familiar to the agent, but at that distance he couldn't be sure. All he could see clearly was that the little blonde was approaching him, with a demented look of determination.

Banner watched as the girl he had known as Beverly neared him, her eyes reflecting the madness that consumed her. All the other slaves had been twisted into bestial engines of destruction when the Gamma Treatment had been turned on them. Their size and appearance hadn't changed, but their strength had been multiplied by at least two, and their intelligence had been divided by twenty. They had become unreasoning demons of aggressive malevolence.

But Banner had not changed. When the treatment bathed his new cage, he had felt nothing. His stomach had already tightened, so the tiny click he seemed to experience could have been from lack of food. And the momentary black spot in his vision could have been weakness. The strange feeling that part of his mind had suddenly stopped functioning must have been his imagination. It must have been. Part of a mind could not just stop functioning. Not now. Not after all he had been through. Oh, please, not now!

Then the small white hands ripped at his throat. One shapely knee smashed into his stomach and an awful molten face slashed across his vision. He felt himself falling backward. His back hit the edge of the sofa and, for a moment only, the vibrating hand muscles released his neck. Then the crushing pressure was back, far more insistent and

infinitely more frightening than the jungle snake had been.

Banner's arms flailed helplessly. His legs kicked feebly. He had not understood. He had waited too long. The tiny, vulnerable, tormented girl was going to kill him.

There was no tug at his subconscious.

There were no floodgates, no circle of energy.

There was no sickening feeling in his stomach.

His Curse was cured and this time there would be no Change. He had reached his final death.

Twelve

“Wait a minute!” shouted the General, pointing. “He’s not fighting! Wittenborn! He’s not fighting, I said!”

The scientist looked up, tears making a wading pool in his cupped hands. He stared at his repulsive handiwork, turned to the enraged despot, and spat at him. The mucus hit the plexiglass wall without a sound and ran down to the floor. Maxwell Wittenborn hastily turned and walked behind the cover of his massive equipment.

“Wittenborn! What is this?” No reply was forthcoming. “Guards!” the General shouted, changing his tack. “Stop that girl! Move!”

A pair of sentries quickly unlatched the test cube and hustled in. They grabbed the blonde beneath the arms and were suddenly splattered against the wall, her nails making tracks in their faces. Four more men ran in and leaped upon her. Two broken jaws and one cracked rib later, six more men had joined in holding down the petite Beverly, until she lost consciousness from the ravages of her newborn energy. The shapely body simply could not maintain the level of frenzied activity any longer.

The General had slowly seethed while his men were being hurled about like puppets. As soon as the blonde lost consciousness, he exploded.

“All right!” he burst out, spinning to face his startled guests. “Party’s over! You have seen!” The loglike forefinger stabbed at the ceiling. “You know my full power!” The finger became a vibrating fist. “I can destroy nations!” The fist swung down into a widened palm. “I will set

brother against brother!" He took a backward glance at the still form of the blonde girl. "Lover against lover!" he spat. "I will hold this power over the world that dared to scorn me! *Now* fear me, *now* bow to me! Do you hear? *Fear me!"* The gloved fists beat at the crimson-clothed chest with the sound of a petrified redwood being axed. The sound reverberated down the crowd-choked hall.

Those assembled within did not need any further encouragement. Like the sheep they were, they feared him enough to turn tail and run. The throne room emptied like an opened dam. Curtiss was swept along with the hysterical mob, who trampled over themselves to reach the relative safety of their own homes. The foreign dignitaries flooded across the grounds to the airport, only to be herded into barracks under the express instructions of the General. No one was about to leave before the Plan was put into effect.

The guards left the slaves' bodies where they lay and dragged the semi-conscious Banner outside. The tarpaulin was dropped back over the transparent coliseum. A pail of water was then unceremoniously dumped on the doctor. He awoke to see the General's face before him.

"I'm still alive," he said incredulously.

"Why?" the dictator barked.

"What?"

Banner was still lying on his back, his new mind racing. It was strangely clear for the first time in ages, but fairly stifled at the same time. Some things came rushing back with crystal clarity, but a strange, dark shape seemed to pulsate near the corners of his consciousness.

"Why, why, why, why?" The General continued to rant, standing like a monument over him. "Why didn't you fight?"

"Everyone reacts differently to gamma radiation," shrieked a voice behind the demonic bulk. Banner looked up and the General spun around to see Rosanne Wittenborn staring at him with undisguised loathing. "No one can expect all people to react the same way under such artificial pressure," she continued stridently, "no one but a fool or a jackass."

"Well, well, well," chortled the dictator. "There's still some life left, is there? That's admirable on the one hand, and remarkable on the other. Guards!" he commanded, pointing a backward hand at Banner, who had uneasily reached his feet. "Cover him. Leave the girl tied. Bring the scientist out to her."

The General backed away slowly. He quietly waited while Banner was surrounded by six guards and Dr. Maxwell Wittenborn was brought out of his cage and over toward his daughter.

Wittenborn looked at her with repentance and trepidation. She looked back at him with pity, disgust, and an impossible love. He did not touch her. She said nothing. They remained near each other, but there was no tearful reunion, no kind words. For there was a new and awful wall between them. It was as clear as the plexiglass wall, and, unfortunately, just as immovable.

The General moved into the scientist's lair and retrieved the gamma device himself. His footsteps, as he walked back between the two sets of captives, echoed in the cavernous hall. Shortly before, it had been filled with revelers, but now it was empty and littered, like yesterday's parade. The scene took on a surreal appearance: an all too real madman in an all too real country holding an all too possible destructive device.

"So this is all it is," he marveled, holding the rectangular box up to the moonlight. "It was a natural progression, I suppose, from that messy dynamite, to the awkward atom bombs, to the messy nuclear bombs, to the wasteful neutron bombs, to the nasty germ bombs, to the sterile space weapons, to this—a Gamma Treatment, simply magnifying organic radiation found throughout our atmosphere. We breath it every day and don't even know its effect.

"But with this simple switch and the right set of magnifying lenses, you can turn people into mindless, aggressive beasts. Whole countries could turn in on themselves. With my jet prototype, we'll be only too capable of wiping out city after city. You know, it's amazing what some defense department exporters will do for a five-percent share of a diamond mine."

The General's voice began to grow in tempo and timbre. "We will be able to move so fast that the East Coast will be just finishing itself off when the Rockies start. What fun." He gave one macabre chuckle, then turned around.

"Are you just going to leave us here?" Rosanne demanded.

"Oh, no," said the General. "You'll be well taken care of." He turned to leave again.

"Bruce!" the girl suddenly screamed, squirming against her bonds. "Do it! Do it now! If you ever had a reason before, do it now!"

Banner stood there helplessly. The General looked at the tattered and exhausted doctor with a droll expression.

"Think of all the children, Bruce!" Rosanne moaned desperately. "All the people! All the women! Tearing at each other—picture it! Oh, Bruce, please! Please!" she screamed pathetically.

Banner's eyes were heavy. His head was heavier. What did she want from him? Her words crashed into his mind, then slowly sank into an oozing blackness. Part of his mind blazed with a sudden energy. Then,

just as quickly, the weariness consumed him again. He was hurt, he was confused, and he was helpless.

"Do it?" the General echoed derisively. "Please?" he mimicked. "What is this fellow?" He motioned to the wasted specimen between the guards. "Hercules? Charles Atlas! No, Miss Wittenborn, there's no savior here, no green jungle guide."

Both Banner and Rosanne suddenly centered their attention on the smug despot. He laughed.

"My slavers say he was killed in a helicopter crash," the General explained. "They saw it from afar. He fell; the copters exploded and fell on top of him. No survivors were found."

Rosanne looked a last time to Banner, her entire being twisted in supplication.

"Bruce," she said a last time. The name was like a death rattle, a cross between a wail and a curse.

Banner's hands rose almost against his will, palms up. His eyelids sank across his tired vision. His knees bent as though in an invisible wind. Like a man disappearing into quicksand, his body lowered itself to the floor. A numbness crept over him like a warm blanket. He pulled it around him. The ache he felt was good, he decided. It meant he was mortal. It meant he could die without meaning. It meant he was again, truly, no one. No part of him raged against the insane injustice. No piece of him railed against humanity's lunacies. It meant he could just curl up, all by himself, and let the wind blow him away.

The General looked at the fallen figure in distaste. He turned and strode out of the hall in the direction of the jet hangars.

Curtiss finally detached himself from the charging crowd. He had been screamed at only once, by a guard in a superior-looking uniform, but the language used sounded like hysteria with the accent on fury. So Curtiss just motioned vacantly until dozens more people swept him away.

He found himself behind a thick stone column in the "forum" section of the mansion. It was one of those ostentatious domed jobs, filled with a tile mosaic floor, murals depicting the General in various absurd poses, and an opaque dome held up by seventeen Greek-looking braces. Scattered about the floor lay the mob's refuse—a handkerchief, several shoes, a jacket or two, and one unconscious body.

Curtiss checked himself for wounds, thinking about what he had witnessed. The General's variety show had changed the agent's priorities somewhat. That dictator definitely had to go, he thought. Next in line was Wittenborn, the threat-in-spite-of-himself. Still, the General already had the necessary knowledge to turn anyone into a

frothing fiend. First things first—the tyrant must meet his maker.

The agent took a quick look around at the rapidly emptying hall. He checked his fingernails, touched behind both his ears, then took off his shoes and socks.

With a pistol "borrowed" from a fallen sentry, C.I.A. agent Bradford Curtiss started to make his way back to the throne room.

Banner was thinking. It was a delight after all the years of disorientation, even in his present predicament—especially in his present predicament, he mused, because the sharply defined memories kept his mind off what was to become of him and his world.

He remembered the bright spotlights of the huge limo that had borne down on him in the New York City alley. He remembered old Sir John. He remembered the Frenchman at the U.N. He remembered the German, the Russian, the Britisher, the Oriental, the Africans, and the American . . . Who was the American? That vision was just at the edge of his blind spot. He could remember an American, but he couldn't remember who he was or where he came from. There was something about the wooden cage they had been in. Rosanne, himself, and . . .

Banner thought. Rosanne had been with him every step of the way, from the first time he saw her and she said . . . she said . . . but wait a minute. That was impossible . . . unless . . .

It came to him easily, all the parts fitting together like a well-made model. He put the flat of his hands down on the floor and pushed himself up with difficulty. The guards around him moved like waves around a pebble thrown into a pond.

"Rosanne," he called.

She sat with her head down, the guards still surrounding her and her crestfallen father. At the sound of Banner's voice, her head rose in hope, her eyes bright with anticipation.

"Yes?"

"Your brother, Tony . . ."

Her face closed in defeated disappointment. Her answer was as cold as that of a hateful mother lecturing a retarded child.

"He's dead, Bruce."

"I don't think so," he hesitantly replied.

"What *are* you talking about?" she retorted in the same tone.

"Rosanne," he spoke softly, his mind running over the speed limit, "how did the General get to you at the U.N.? Who could have arranged that attack?"

"What?" Max Wittenborn perked up in confusion.

"Someone must have tipped him off as to your location after your father was abducted. Someone must have given him the details of the security at the U.N. The C.I.A. would never have been caught so flat-footed with this much at stake."

"So?" she asked with sudden apprehension. "What does this have to do with Tony?"

"Miss Wittenborn," Bruce replied with pained precision, "your brother told you about my being smashed on the head at the U.N. It was what made you sure I wasn't one of the enemy. Remember?"

"Yes," she said with perverse disbelief. "When I woke up he gave me the details."

"But how did he know? He was supposed to have been gassed at the time."

"He *could* have woken up," she said in the same snide tone of voice.

"The Russian boat captain said we were unconscious for *days*. I don't think he fell in and out of consciousness."

"Tony?" Maxwell Wittenborn croaked.

Rosanne saw her father's stricken expression and quickly interjected, "Well, you are the consciousness expert, but what good does any of this do us?"

"Miss Wittenborn," Banner said with strength, "I think Tony is alive and up to his neck in this. Just how deeply involved he is, I can't be sure."

"I can."

The voice was immediately recognizable, even from a distance. Everyone, including the guards, turned around.

"There!" shouted Banner, pointing to the left.

At the top of one of the two stairwells, standing on the balcony framed in moonlight was seven feet of ceremonious splendor. Dressed in a white native robe stood Anthony William Wittenborn.

"A very rudimentary deduction," he said, his voice echoing out from his elevated position. "It's amazing how such brilliant people can be so stupid."

Rosanne stared up at her brother, scarcely believing that her own flesh and blood could have put her through all this. "Tony!" she pleaded.

"Don't called me that!" he snapped, cutting her off. He hurled himself down the wide steps. "That's a disgusting name. Why the hell was I the one to get stuck with an Italian name, anyway?"

Their father had been staring at his son's royal garb with tortured

amazement. His head had begun quivering from side to side, and now his mouth opened.

"Your mother . . ." he began with a groan.

"Oh, yes!" the young Wittenborn interrupted loudly. "My mother, my sweet, lily-white mother with the maiden name of Rosettini. Wonderful woman." He approached his father with an odious glare. "You! You were the direct descendant of the Witten race of Africa! Why do you think our name is Wittenborn? You had chieftain's blood in your veins. You had the strength of our rich earth and the wisdom of the supreme one. And you married an Italian?" Tony spat at his father's feet.

Rosanne bucked against the throne's straps and cried out, "Tony! Don't you dare say anything against . . ."

"I said don't call me that! Call me Africa, call me a Wittenborn, but don't use that horrid name before me again!" It was amazing to see the tall American pansy turned into a raging, zealot. "You *would* like our mother," he cooed to his sister. "It's from her that you got your classic American beauty."

He placed one limp hand under her chin and surveyed the curved eyes, the small nose, and thin lips. "You are not of true Witten born," he judged, then swept away.

Rosanne pulled so hard at her bonds that one of her wrist straps drew blood. "What are you doing?" she bemoaned. "What are you doing?"

"I'm finished my part of the Plan. It was my Plan to begin with, you know," 'Africa' said mincingly, a little of the old slyness replacing his devout righteousness. "I approached the General with it. 'How about showing the world in two easy steps?' I suggested."

"I hate to break into this family dispute," said Banner, "but what exactly is this plan?"

"Simplicity itself, boy," the Wittenborn man said. "With the Gamma Treatment, I take over the world . . . or destroy it."

"You? You take over the world?" shouted Rosanne derisively.

"Yes, me!" he stormed in return. "That fat idiot will do all the dirty work, but he doesn't have enough brains to know when to go to the bathroom. You know that speech he gave tonight about power and the natural progression of weaponry? *I* taught him that! He just listens to me lecture, then repeats it, like a monkey—like a big, fat ape! Let him bathe the United States with the Treatment; I don't care. But he's going to find a great big surprise when he gets back."

Africa Wittenborn snapped his fingers and the gathered guards immediately grabbed the scientist and Banner by the arms. The rest of

them pulled Rosanne's throne out from behind the table.

"I've been planning this for a long time," he said, taking a proffered automatic pistol from one of the men. Banner fought weakly against the taut grips on his wrists, elbows, and shoulders, but to little effect. The regally robed man swung around to face his nearest relatives. Banner watched as the bemused face turned satanic. The dark eyes narrowed until they became slits, the wide nostrils flared like opening valves, the lips crept across the white teeth like two worms. He saw Wittenborn's neck muscles tighten until it looked like he had two steel beams just under the skin.

Banner, for the first time in his life, had witnessed someone else going through the Change. It was Tony who was now the monster, the unthinking, unfeeling, mighty beast. But he was a creature created out of lethal hatred, and Banner knew that this hulk would have no trouble killing.

The gun in the lithe black hand rose. The sight bracketed the circular piece on the end of the barrel, and both were centered on the heaving chest of Rosanne Wittenborn.

"I don't need you now," he told his sister. "I don't want you to see. I will cut off my past and only live the glorious free future. I will repent my past sins by ending your sins."

The dark eyes shone, and the voice was without inflection. He absolutely meant every word he said. Banner suddenly remembered an ancient rite in which a disgraced member of a tribe gained retribution through the murder of one of his own family.

Moonlight reflected off the sleek gun, and it looked as if it were charged with electricity. Rosanne stared down the barrel, then began to wail wretchedly.

"Bruce, oh, Bruce, please! I don't want to die! Why don't you do something? You have the power! Why can't you use it? Aren't I enough? Can't you, won't you . . . ?" Her cried were transformed into grieving sobs.

Wittenborn raised his free hand to steady the automatic. He shook his head. "No," he said to himself. *"I* have the power." Then he began to chant. His words were those of ancient native prayers, filled with the promise of spiritual retribution.

The voice rose in volume. Rosanne's head moved up and she pulled herself from side to side in the chair. At no time did her torso completely leave the sight of the gun barrel. Like a lustful eye, it stayed on her. Tony concentrated on his words, uttering each consonant, each vowel, each syllable with a savage pride.

The voice rose to a mighty howl, like a tribal wind screeching through the room with the force of a hurricane. Banner knew there

were just moments left before the gun would fire. Then it would turn and fire again, then once more, until only Tony and the guards would remain alive. Banner fought the men holding him, but it didn't help. He was not moved. No rage welled up inside him. No subconscious voice screamed. No floodgates opened. No currents connected. His mind sank into a pit of despair.

Banner looked up. His gaze locked with that of Rosanne Wittenborn. Her face was torn with hateful accusation. He would never see what she was seeing in that last moment.

But suddenly something on her face changed. An abrupt understanding seemed to infuse her every feature, and then her eyes screwed into his with a surreal intensity. No gaze could fill his brain like this. There was no such thing as another dimension, E.S.P., or even true love. Bruce Banner was a doctor and he didn't believe in these things.

But someone else did.

Wittenborn stopped chanting. His finger tightened on the trigger. Rosanne shut her eyes and screamed out one word.

"Hulk!"

And Banner felt the floodgates open at last.

The sudden cry had shocked everyone in the room. Wittenborn, thinking that his gun had gone off, hastily dropped it. The scientist, thinking the same thing, fainted. The guards dropped to their knees and pulled out their weapons.

Only Rosanne remained in her previous position, silently watching Bruce Banner turn into the Hulk at her command.

In the split second before the Change came over him, the doctor realized the truth. The monster that shared his body was not the underside of his personality; it was not the underside of anything. It could not be killed or cured—it shared his mind. It could be harnessed, it could be chained, it might even be controlled, but it would not be stopped.

Most of the guards screamed and ducked. Tony stumbled back, his hands before his face, as the power of the metamorphosis threw Banner ten yards across the floor. The Hulk slid to a stop against the side of the table. The green hands and feet worked together. Quickly, the Hulk rose to his feet and charged. The guards simply watched themselves get mowed down by the rampaging freak. Tony fell to his knees and scrambled to get his gun again. His hands gripped it like a vise and he rose to face the bright green monster that stood before him.

Thirteen

Curtiss heard the explosion from out in the passageway. After the first gunshot he had expected the worst—still he'd felt he should proceed cautiously. But this tore it. If they were using grenades inside the throne room, he would have to act fast, regardless of the consequences. He pulled his pistol up, raced over to the two massive doors, and, with a muscle wrenching kick, knocked them open.

Three guards flew by him, and Curtiss curled, dropped, and rolled. But the guards didn't stop to fight. They flew, feet first, into the passageway, landing against the opposite wall with three sickening splats. Suddenly it was raining masonry. Curtiss skidded, crawled, and somersaulted to the side of the room while hunks of plaster and cement dropped around him.

He came to a brutal stop against the wall. Then pushed his head forward and saw what had once been the throne room. Men were strewn everywhere; the walls had gaping holes in them. The plexiglass cubes were shattered into a million pieces all over the floor, and the scientist's machinery was leaping up and down. Pieces were flying off it like metal dandruff.

Curtiss moved out from his hiding place to get a better view. As he rounded one side of the stairwell, he spied Maxwell Wittenborn and his son lying on the floor. Rosanne was sitting on a throne, but she seemed to have fainted. Then a huge hunk of machinery exploded,

and Curtiss saw an enormous green man, his face alight with wrath, emerge from the wreckage.

The monster moved toward the huddled form of Tony Wittenborn as Curtiss's gun came up. He fired three times before the pistol jammed. The bullets whistled over the ivy-colored monster's head. The green man ignored them, but the shots seemed to awaken Wittenborn. The young man turned his head, scrambled to his feet, and began to stumble toward Curtiss. The creature followed slowly, but with wrathful certainty.

Curtiss hit the gun with his fist twice, then tried firing. Nothing. He hit it again two times, then twice more. He aimed and pulled the trigger. This time the discharges fired true, headed right for the beast's chest. One flew over a hastily dipped right shoulder, but another smashed into the monster's neck. Curtiss looked beyond the approaching Wittenborn with disbelief. The bullet crashed against the green torso and careened across the ribs without leaving a mark. It looped behind the marching monstrosity, then bounced with a rattle across the tile.

A hysterical Tony was flying past the agent. Curtiss danced back and put out an arm to stop him. Wittenborn slapped at the arm, and the agent's palm moved up, accidentally pressing against the man's brow. His left forefinger bucked and there was a misty splash. Tony Wittenborn fell in a limp heap at Curtiss's feet.

"Damn!" Curtiss screamed, falling to his knees. He had inadvertently activated his second weapon while he'd been unjamming the pistol. He hastily pushed the fallen form over and checked the pulse. Nothing. He looked at the face. Tony Wittenborn's dying expression fit him. The open eyes stared out over a twisted mouth that was grimacing at the irony of his own death. Curtiss laid the now useless gun on the man's chest.

He looked up to find the beast staring at him. Curtiss asked himself whether it would be worth trying to reach the acid sack behind his ear. But the innocent, almost concerned expression on the Hulk's face defused this thought. The green thing grunted inquiringly. Curtiss, not knowing what else to do, shrugged.

"Don't hurt him!" he heard someone shout. Both he and the Hulk turned toward Rosanne Wittenborn, who now sat erect in her chair. "It's all right. He won't hurt you unless you try to hurt me or him."

"Fine," said Curtiss incongruously. "Fine. That's just fine."

"Quickly, untie me. The General will get away!"

Curtiss sidled to the right of the Hulk, who lumbered behind, befuddled. The agent ran toward the still form of Maxwell Wittenborn while the Hulk went to Rosanne's side like a trained elephant. One

green finger reached down and broke the straps as if they were cardboard. She leaped up only to collapse again as her blood-starved arms and legs struggled to regain their strength. The Hulk lifted her up gently and brought her over to her father.

In the middle of the scientist's chest, there was a dark hole, and a deep red liquid ran out of it. Curtiss looked over at the beauty in the beast's arms.

"Tony," she said with tragic certainty. "Just one shot." She looked about to faint again as she gazed down at her dead father. Then she buried her face in the Hulk's chest.

Curtiss suddenly noticed the quiet. He got up and looked around him. Outside, the airport blazed with activity. Beneath his feet, a floor down, twenty-odd slaves awaited their fates. But here it was as quiet as a tomb. Guards lay strewn about, machinery smoked and sputtered, and blood ran red among the leftover party favors.

"We're not through yet," he said to himself more than to the girl and her pet freak. And even as he spoke, dozens of machinegun-bearing guards appeared in the doorways. The agent and the Hulk saw them at the same time. Curtiss dived behind the table and the green beast quickly turned around as the weapons barked.

Tiny hunks of lead flew everywhere, ripping up the floor, chipping the marble, blasting the glass, and tearing strips off the wood. The only thing left unaffected by the havoc was the Hulk's back. The small pieces of shrapnel whacked against him, but to the green man they felt like a harmless swarm of flies. Curtiss found a fallen rifle and began to return the fire blindly. There were so many guards that almost any return bullet would be bound to hit somebody.

Rosanne cowered as she lay in one massive green arm. With his free hand, the Hulk gripped the rim of the huge wooden table. Effortlessly, he raised the one-ton slab on its side. Then he moved behind it, shielding his angel with his body, and placed her beside the amazed Curtiss. Rosanne opened her mouth to speak, but the green hand stopped her. The Hulk turned to the agent and they shared one rational look. Its meaning was not lost on Curtiss.

"Get behind me," he told the girl.

The Hulk nodded, then rose to his full height. With a growling grimace, he left the cover of the table.

"Hulk!" Rosanne screamed, throwing herself after him. Curtiss just managed to hold her back, with an arm wrapped around her waist.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "That thing's our only chance now!"

Rosanne didn't answer. She couldn't. She didn't know how she felt

about anyone anymore. Her father was dead, her brother had tried to kill her, her love had disappeared. All that was left was the Hulk.

And he was walking directly into the line of fire. The guards moved forward, blazing away with their sub-machineguns as they came. The bullets made a light show around the solid eight feet of muscle. The muscles tightened into steel sheets. The Hulk stumbled, fell back, and slid, but he did not stop.

Tiny cracks appeared on his rock-like exterior. Little drops of blood began to seep out. His head came down, his arm came up. Amid the hail storm of death, the Hulk recognized his own mortality.

"They'll tear him to pieces!" Rosanne cried in Curtiss's face. "We've got to do something!"

"We'll do something, all right," said the agent. "When I move out into the open, you run behind me for the stairs. Whatever you do, stay behind me. We'll get up those stairs and out of here."

"But what about . . ."

"Believe me, Miss Wittenborn, if anyone can take care of himself, that thing can. Get ready."

The Hulk swatted at the metal flies. But they were everywhere. The guards had arranged themselves in waves, so while one line reloaded, the other could keep the monster at bay. Their steady onslaught served not only to repel the Hulk—slowly and surely they were beginning to hurt him. The Hulk thought of his angel. He moved forward. The bullets pushed him back. He thought of his angel. He moved forward.

Curtiss crawled across the floor to where a machine-gun lay in the outstretched hand of a dead guard. He pulled it behind the table with no difficulty. All the guns were aimed at the Hulk.

"Get set," he whispered harshly. He crawled to the edge of the table closest to the stairway. Some lead whirled by, but it had been slowed by the Hulk's defense. "All right!" he cried. "Now!"

He leaped out from behind the table. Rosanne hesitated for only a moment. Then she was up and they were both running for the balcony. Curtiss made it to the third stair before the bullet hit him. It deflected from the Hulk's torso and struck him in the side. Rosanne kept running.

The agent fell forward, the banister knocking the gun out of his hand. Its clatter caught the Hulk's attention. He turned to see his angel gaining the top steps while the agent crawled up behind her. But when his head had turned, all heads had turned. Out on the corner of his eye, the Hulk saw the guns move around toward the stairway.

His reaction was immediate. The two giant fists came up and then

crashed to the floor with every ounce of strength he could muster. First, the marble tile splintered into flat, spinning chips. Then the wood braces beneath it cracked as the fists came down again with all their might. Next, the metal sheet, which served to soundproof the slaves' quarters, tore open and fell in. Six feet of insulation simply disappeared in the concussion. The Hulk felt himself falling. His body twisted around, and then he hit concrete.

Kelli saw the ceiling crack before anyone else did. She had time for one exclamation before the beast came smashing down. He slammed onto the hay floor like thirty anvils dropped out of a ten-story window. But even before the dust had settled, the monster was up and running. He moved forward until the bars of the cages stopped him. With an absentminded swing of his hand, they ripped out of the ground and went spinning off like a revolving saw. Three hit the wall horizontally and stuck there like arrows.

The slaves struggled back to avoid the Hulk's charge, but suddenly he stopped in the middle of a cell. He stared intently at the ceiling, and then the leg muscles stretched and he moved upward.

A gray wash covered him as the new layers of minerals turned to powder under his fists. The gritty concrete shattered, the insulation parted like the Red Sea, the metal tore open like cotton, the wood like foam, and then his fingers burst through the cool marble tiles.

He came up directly in the middle of the guards.

Curtiss turned around painfully at the top of the steps. He saw the green monster turning his might on the hapless sentries. They were even shooting each other in an effort to get a new bead on the Hulk. The agent grimaced as the bullet lodged just inside his body sent another twinge of pain through his nervous system. Rosanne waited at the balcony's edge, motioning agitatedly. Curtiss turned then, realizing that the Hulk had only borne the brunt of the onslaught in order to give the girl time to escape. And only after she had escaped had he thought about defending himself. The beast was definitely smitten.

At the present moment, the beast was smashing everything his fists made contact with. He swung and he swung, until the air whipping between his arms sounded like a monsoon. He reveled in his strength.

He was alive again! He lived! The Hulk was alive!

Fourteen

The General was ready. He looked himself over in the hangar's full-length mirror. The blue and green flight suit was adorned with useless zippers, sewn-on epaulets, meaningless insignias, and a completely empty utility belt. The General thought it looked magnificent.

He took a moment to circle the prototype. It was also outfitted beautifully, but with an official-looking U.S.A. insignia and a completely false set of code numbers. The on-board computer was programmed so that no radar or tracking station would realize it wasn't one of theirs until much too late.

The General raised his hand in an "A-O.K." sign. The spotlights that had pegged the ship on the runway suddenly went off, and the sparkling red lights of the runway itself went on. The foreign dignitaries had plastered their faces against the barracks windows to get a glimpse of the General's procession. After all, the dictator's every move was a three-ring circus. Now, as he prepared to destroy the United States, he was attended by three tailors, two advisors, several chefs, and countless courtesans.

With a wave, he dismissed them all. Two technicians came forward to secure the proper hoses to the General's special outfit. After fifteen minutes they were finished, and the first sound of gunfire was heard from the mansion.

One of his advisors came running up and breathlessly inquired, "Shall we investigate, sire?"

"Don't be stupid," he replied. "There's too much at stake. Get this plane off the ground. Hurry!"

The main pilot was hastily brought out, swathed from head to toe in his plain, but effective, pressurized garb. The General urged him into the cockpit just as one entire wall of the mansion exploded outward. All those who were gathered at the airstrip oohed and ahed as if if were just a part of the General's "bon voyage," but the man himself began to slap his technicians into even greater activity.

"Hurry!" he commanded. "Hurry!"

Rosanne and Curtiss were thrown down by the force of the blast. Even in his wounded state, Curtiss spun in the air so that he would fall, protecting the girl.

"Get off me," was her only thanks. "We've got to keep going."

Curtiss slid off her and looked back. The light from inside the house spilled out across the jungle-like yard, showing the running guards in half-silhouette. From behind the fallen rubble came a rumbling growl, then a renewed flurry of green fists. With a dizzy lurch, Curtiss got to his feet and stumbled after the retreating girl.

The Hulk was alone. Everyone had run away. The house was empty. With satisfaction, he watched the shadows disappearing into the black night. He listened as the devastation behind him sputtered sparks and spat water. Vast clouds of steam covered most of the area. The Hulk moved quickly in the direction of the beckoning lights outside.

Curtiss kicked the engineer right behind the knee. He felt the man's work pants part as his leg buckled. The engineer's face tightened, his eyes rolled up, his tongue pushed out from between his teeth, and then he fell like a sack of potatoes to the hangar floor. Curtiss looked around urgently for another victim—any victim—but the area was totally deserted, all the other participants having chosen to watch the General take off.

"Aw, the hell with it," the agent muttered, tearing at the acid sack and hurling the ball into a sink on the wall. Seven seconds later the sink began to deteriorate.

"Quick," said Rosanne, "while we still have the chance."

He turned to the girl with a hurt look. She motioned to him to lie down and the look turned to surprise. When she ripped off his shirt, he felt sure he had accidentally stumbled into a James Bond movie.

"Now is hardly the time," he murmured.

"You're delirious," she chastised. "That's why now is exactly the time. You won't get very far with that bullet wound." She began to tear up his shirt. She had devised a compress and bandage from his

garment by the time the sink had disappeared and a small hole began appearing in the wall.

"Now, that's what I call acid," said the agent.

The General was ready. Again. He had forced his way into the little cockpit after having overseen the installation of the Gamma Treatment. The engineers had set up a projection system that gave the weapon's beam the widest radius possible at the highest range of altitudes. It sat in a little harness in a little box in the middle of the jet.

All systems were go. The General gave himself permission to take off. In order to give his faithful audience more for their money, the dictator had instructed the cramped pilot to make it a classic liftoff, utilizing the entire runway. The pilot tried to explain that this jet needed only a quarter of that space, but the General would not be swayed. So the entire runway it was.

The pilot leaned over and started the engine.

The Hulk heard something roar. Then he heard the noise turn to a deep whine. Was it another beast to be challenged? The Hulk's fists clenched and unclenched. Something was scaring his angel, that was for sure. He had seen her running across the field and into the big place where the noise was coming from. Then, through a hole in the wall, he'd seen her run through a doorway over to his left.

He moved his large legs as fast as he could. Stones became powder under his feet. The noise grew louder. He began to move in its direction, and then a metal bird began to emerge from the enclosure.

The Hulk suddenly felt a tug in his chest. He looked down in wonder, but nothing seemed to be wrong. He felt his mouth move down at the edges and his brow quiver. He did not know what these movements meant. He looked at the metal bird again. Then there was that same hitch in his chest. He pounded one fist against the hurt spot.

The metal bird was now completely visible. The Hulk stared at it. He looked from its tail to its head. And there, through a clear section up front, he could see a dark profile. His angel? It was too far away to tell. He would just have to get closer. The legs moved again.

Matthews came in low and fast. He jammed on all the jammers, flipped down all the flaps, and pretty much broke all the rules. He was flying on the edge of desperation. As soon as he had received Curtiss's signal, he had sped along with all the jet's defensive devices on. So far he had not been spotted, let alone challenged. Now if he could only

keep it up until he made it to the General's tiny nation.

Curtiss had expended all his weapons, but did that mean he was finished with his work, or dead? What would Matthews find when he arrived? No matter what his fantasies, the blond agent was not prepared for the reality of the situation. He banked up as soon as he reached the border of the General's domain, and then he came sweeping down over a burned-out husk where the despot's mansion was supposed to be. He pulled around to the private airport where an even more incredible sight awaited him.

From above, it looked like a mini model of his own jet taxiing down the runway. Actually taxiing! And there, right in the middle of the blacktop two hundred yards down, was a tiny speck. A speck that was running toward the jet. A green speck.

The Hulk waited. The metal bird was growing larger now, picking up speed as it went. He tried to peer into its head to find his angel, but the jet was coming too fast. The Hulk realized he would not be able to stop it without hurting someone. So he decided not to stop it. He decided he would just check for his angel.

"Pull up! Pull up, I say!"

"We can't! We haven't gained enough speed."

"Gain it, gain it!" The General leaned forward and started waving his arms. "Hulk! Get out of the way! Get out of the way!"

The plane hit the Hulk at near liftoff speed. It had risen off the ground almost five feet when the landing gear smashed into the green chest. The Hulk bounced off a wheel once, flew back, then wrapped his limbs around the bottom of the craft.

"We've hit him," said the pilot.

"Is he gone?"

"I can't tell—we're taking off, but I don't know if he's been knocked behind us or not."

"No matter, no matter. Once we're airborne, there's nothing he can do. Nothing."

The Hulk's grip held. He felt his stomach sink and his mind whirl, but his hands and legs gripped the landing gear with riveting power. The horizon spun like a ferris wheel around him, but still he held on. It was for his angel.

One hand released the wheel and reached up. There was a tiny hole there, about the size of the gear. Four green fingers latched onto the edge and pulled.

"Wait a minute. Something's wrong with the landing gear," said the

pilot.

"What? What?"

"I don't know what! These devices don't talk—they just light up!"

"Do something, then!" screamed the General. "Fix it—bank, roll, dive, I don't care! Do something, you idiot!"

The Hulk had torn open a three-foot hole by the time the jet began to twirl. It spun like a top, and the air whistling between the landing gear felt like thousands of tiny fingers pulling at him. He closed his eyes, tightened his grip, and kept ripping.

The hole was finally big enough. The Hulk climbed up and entered the supersonic jet. The force of the barrel-rolling pushed him over to the side, right against a system of harnesses and pulleys. He turned his head and stared at a little rectangular box.

"We're losing altitude," said the pilot.

"More power, then," commanded the General.

"We can't. There won't be enough energy for the Treatment."

"That's it!" shouted the General with enough volume to scar the pilot's eardrum. "Aim the Treatment at the landing gear! You can do that, can't you? If that Hulk thing is on it, he'll go crazy and fall off!"

"But . . ."

"Do it! I command you!"

The pilot did as he was told.

The Hulk suddenly couldn't breathe. He threw his head left and right to find the thing that was doing this to him. Then there was that feeling he had had at the airstrip, like two walls closing in on his chest. He had just gasped some air when the pain hit him square in the stomach like a fist.

The Hulk howled in rage and began swinging. But the pain got worse, much worse, until the beast was doubled over onto his knees. His head began to ache. The Hulk had never known such pain. His eyes stung, and there was a yellow-orange wash covering everything he looked at. He looked wildly about to see what was hurting him. But there was nothing—no men, no animals.

The Hulk thought about the rhino king and the jungle snake. Is this what they had felt? Was he being punished for what he had done?

The metal bird gained altitude and the air grew thin. The Hulk lay against the hull, gasping, his hands holding his chest and his head rocking from side to side. As the Hulk shook his agitated head back and forth, he suddenly saw a sliver of light inside a tiny metal box. The sliver appeared just inside a lens which was pointed out of the plane and downward. The Hulk fought through the haze of his agony. Was that light on before he had felt all this pain? The Hulk knew the

answer: no. With an all consuming scream of effort, his left arm swung. The fist hit the box broadside, immediately smashing it into thousands of little pieces. There was a greenish flash of energy and smoke, but the fist kept going. Through steel and plastic many times the strength of lead, it kept going. And it only stopped when a tornado of wind wrapped around it.

"Oh, my God!" screamed the pilot, suddenly fighting the controls like a possessed man.

"Now what?" the General asked wearily, his face turned in the other direction.

"Goddamn it, man, look!" the pilot screamed. "We're losing pressure. We've sprung a hole somewhere. If I don't right this, we'll crash faster than anything has ever crashed before!"

"I don't care what our policy is!" raged Curtiss into his jet's comm-link. "These are human beings I'm talking about here—American citizens! In chains, you understand? Look, I don't care if white slavery *has* been a fact of life in the new Africa for years! For once in your life, make a stand! Get a team in to get them out, and do it now, while all hell's broken loose. I'm telling you, the government and the press won't even know! Damn it, I saved the world, didn't I? You owe me this much."

His tirade was interrupted by a sudden violent explosion. He quickly turned to the nearest porthole and stared down as Matthews made a sweep over the area. Down to their left, on the side of a grassy mountain, was a jet wreck. Pieces of the plane had scattered on its initial impact, leaving a fiery trail behind. The smoke and the flames guaranteed that no human had survived.

Curtiss returned to his radio. "The General is gone," he said wearily. "I mean, he's no longer alive. Yes, and the gamma device is no longer a threat. And, oh, yes, Dr. Wittenborn and his son are dead, too. We did manage to rescue the girl, okay? So after such a great job, you're going to deny me this one little favor? Well, hell, that's big of you. Yes, right now. In and out—it'll be simpler than Entebbe. Yeah, sure, don't worry. My lips are sealed. Yours are, too, aren't they, Blondie?"

"Yeah, sure," said Matthews.

"Matthews says his are too. Yeah, all right. We'll be taking the high road home and getting in just in time for debriefing. What? Just a second." Curtiss turned around to where Rosanne sat, staring out a porthole in silent mourning. Her face was composed but infinitely sad. Curtiss turned back to his comm-link. "Yeah, I think she'll be all right."

He was wrong, the girl thought, staring at the scarred jungle. She

would never be all right again. She had seen the Hulk running toward the General's jet. She had seen him attach himself to the landing gear. And she had seen him disappear into the belly of the plane. Then, moments later, she had climbed into this plane and saved herself. She had run away.

Rosanne Wittenborn stared down at the remains of the General's jet. She compared it to the remains of her own life, then laughed bitterly at the metaphor. She would survive, and she knew it. She would get over the entire experience. Maybe, in future years, she would understand it perfectly, or feel proud that she had known Banner's secret. She might even use the Hulk to scare her children with at story time. It was sad, but it was true.

She thought about Banner and his Hulk. Their faces seemed to appear among the smoke of the wreckage. The poor, tormented man. Both of them. Living with a cruel life's sentence neither could understand. At least for them it was over now. She saw in her mind's eye the General's jet as it had gone into a brutal tail-spin, arcing down to the ground with blinding speed. She remembered the earth-shaking concussion when it had hit and the frenzied screaming of metal. She recalled the billowing ball of flame that had consumed the broken jet and then the steady roar of the fire. There was nothing left now but a charred husk. Searchers would probably not even discover bodies.

Rosanne turned away from the porthole and cried.

Two hands appeared among the wreckage. They were covered with black ash, but here and there a small bit of cracked green skin could be seen. The fingers wriggled against the red-hot metal, trying to get a better grip without singeing the flesh. Finally, the hands gained leverage and pushed in opposite directions. A hole appeared. It bent back until the crack was fully five and a half feet long. Then the hands receded.

A gargantuan body rose fourteen feet off the ground. Its hair was smoking, leaving an arch-shaped exhaust trail as it leaped away from the jet's remains.

The giant hit the ground. He shook himself like a wet dog. Then he looked up and saw his angel reaching for heaven. This time he was sure. It was her face in the porthole just skimming the top of the trees.

He cried to her in joy, but her head did not turn toward him. He yelled, but only her profile showed. He shouted pleadingly, but she just didn't seem to hear. His legs bent and he propelled himself up. The first leap brought him just over the treetops. He waved and hooted at the oncoming jet, but it was still too far away to see him. He crashed down through the trees, leaving footprints in the dirt that

sank to the depth of a foot.

The jet was about to pass overhead. The Hulk hopped up in the air and bowed down to the earth. His haunches lowered until his elbows rested on the dirt. He heard the jet shooting by, and then he propelled himself upward as hard as he could. The Hulk soared. He jumped higher than he ever had before. He saw the jet moving in a direct line at him. He was filled with euphoria. He was going to be with his angel forever.

But then he began to slow down. His face grew alarmed. He had reached the apex of his flight. The jet kept moving at him. The Hulk kicked and flailed in dismay, his mouth working piteously. The metal bird flew just overhead. One green finger slid across its underbelly.

But then it was gone and the Hulk was falling, wailing all the way. Back first, he collided with the sodden earth, sinking into a tailor-made grave. The sound of the jet was still passing over him, as if to torment him. He hadn't made it. His angel was gone.

Rosanne Wittenborn never saw his desperate jump. She never saw him rise out of the ground. She never saw him rage at the heavens with a terrifying woe. And she never saw the huge, clear tears that had rolled down his face.

End Suite

Bruce Banner walked around the hangar for the fifth time. There was evidence of a full-scale purge, and when he crossed the runway blacktop for the sixth time, he noticed the wheel marks of a plane that was as large as a transport. Strange, he thought, all he had seen were the husks of bombed-out jets.

But he didn't let it bother him. He had awakened with a disturbing sense of peace. The disquiet had left him, however, after he'd decided to take the good feelings as they came. Worrying about every little thing could drive a guy crazy.

Banner kept walking around the hangar. There was something about this enclosure, he told himself—as if somebody were drawing him inside. Finally, he succumbed to the whim and entered a convenient hole in the wall. Inside there was an exposed water pipe just running out of liquid, a dead engineer, his face twisted in shock, and the remains of what looked like a shirt. Several indistinct faces shot through his memory, but they weren't clear enough for Banner to recognize them.

He didn't dwell on them, because another feeling was pushing him across the floor. On the opposite side of the gigantic room there was a sliding door. He ran along toward it and then, with great energy, he pulled the opening aside.

Within sat four jet helicopters in a twin hangar fully the size of the one he had just crossed. They were painted a rich black with tiny lettering on their hulls saying JH 5, JH 6, JH 7, and JH 8.

Banner sat down in front of the first of them with a bemused

expression on his face. He didn't know how to fly a jet helicopter, but he figured he had plenty of time to learn.